

## Tithing

HN 29/01/06 pm

Reading: Deuteronomy 14, II Corinthians 8, 9

Study Text: Deuteronomy 14:22-29

Sing Psalms: 112:1-5, 112:6-10, 127, 128

One Lord's Day some years ago I was invited to preach in a tribal community in India. It was an old church, built by Lutheran missionaries, with an elevated pulpit up the front. As I went up I put my water bottle and camera on the floor by the side of the pulpit. When the time came for the collection no bag or plate was passed around. Rather the people all started filing towards the front. And with them they brought bags of rice and millet, baskets of sweet potatoes and eggs, along with cabbages, pumpkins and other vegetables. All this was brought forward until the floor around the pulpit was covered with produce – with my camera and water bottle underneath it all!

Moses told the people of God as they were about to enter Canaan, be sure to set aside a tenth of all that you fields produce each year (14:22). The people were commanded to tithe of their grain, their wine and their oil and of the firstborn of their flocks and herds.

These days preachers are warned not to speak about tithing lest they lose their flock. It can be a very touchy subject. In a paper I downloaded from the internet I found much good exegesis but soon perceived that it was a tirade against preachers of the prosperity gospel, especially tele-evangelists. Some preachers do pressure people to tithe, saying 'if you want the Lord to bless you, you must tithe' or 'the more you give to the Lord the more he will bless you' – 'bless you' meaning give you things of this world of course. Such teaching is certainly not Biblical and it to be rejected. We do not worship a God who can be manipulated in such a manner.

However, despite such false teaching the Bible does speak about tithing. 'But it's only in the OT so does not matter' – this is what some think and say. 'If the church has lots of investments earning money, why should my struggling family be giving to it?' 'When we are finding it hard to make ends meet why should I be giving to the church?' 'Do you see how they waste the money – why should I give any more to them?' Have you heard such comments? What is tithing all about?

### Honour the Lord

This chapter in Deuteronomy is probably an exposition of the third commandment – 'you shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain'. It is about honouring the Lord in all you say and do. In the new land the Lord would provide for his people all that they needed – good land, rain in season and rich harvests. They would have sufficient, indeed plenty, because of the blessing of the Lord. But they were warned not to forget the Lord and think they had achieved this themselves (8:17).

The tithe commanded by the Lord would remind them that it was indeed the Lord who blessed them, and gave them good harvests, and increase in their flocks. They were to take a

portion of this increase to the central place of worship and there give it to the Lord – *that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always* (14:23 ).

It was not that the Lord had need of this produce. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills as the Psalmist says (Psalm 50). The Almighty God does not need man to provide for his needs. Actually the people themselves were to eat their tithe – or at least some of it – there at the sanctuary. They were to eat with thankfulness and with joy before the Lord (14:26). The tithe was brought along with their burnt offerings and sacrifices and eaten at this time of worship. The sacrifices were for atonement for sin – they offered and they ate with thankfulness for spiritual blessing. The tithe was offered and eaten with thankfulness for material blessings in this good land the Lord gave them.

In this passage we see a provision being made for those who lived a long way from the central place of worship (14:24-26). They were allowed to exchange their produce for money, take the money to the sanctuary and buy food there to eat before the Lord – meat, wine, oil or whatever their heart desired. There was no grumbling among them about the tithe. They were to eat what they liked (unclean animals excepted) and rejoice before the Lord with their household. In this way they were to honour the Lord. It was an act of thanksgiving and worship. They gave to the Lord from what he had given them by way of material blessing.

Why a tenth you may ask. In the Presbyterian Church in Mizoram the people practice tithing. They eat rice at most meals and measure this in handfuls. When the women are cooking they measure out the rice and every tenth handful goes into a bag that is for the Lord.

Tithe means tenth in Hebrew. It was Abraham who first gave a tenth. He gave Melchizedek, King of Salem and priest of the Most High God a tenth of the plunder he took when he was victorious in battle (Genesis 14:18f). Moses then commanded the same proportion of produce or income to be given to the Lord.

The matter of Abraham giving a tenth to Melchizedek is taken up at length in Hebrews 7, but it is for the purpose of establishing the superiority of Christ's priesthood, not for establishing a command for tithing. Earthly kings of course always demand a proportion of their subject's income – called a tax. Joseph told the Pharaoh to collect a fifth of all the produce of the land (Genesis 41:34).

### **The Levites and the Needy**

You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates (14:21 cf. 12:19). Who were the Levites? The tribe of Levi was not given any territory in Canaan. They were set apart as priests to serve at the tabernacle of the Lord. How were they to live if they had not land to produce food?

Moses commanded that the Levite be provided for from the tithe (Numbers 18:21). The tithe constituted the inheritance of the Levitical priests. At the end of every third year the tithe was brought to a storage place with each town, and from this the Levite was supplied with food. And not only the priests but the stranger, the widow and the orphan (14:29). The tithe was the means by which the needy were provided for in the society.

What about Levites and ministers and pastors today? The article I read went to great lengths to show that the Levitical priesthood was finished with at the end of the old covenant. Indeed

it was – but so what we might ask? Is there no place for Christian ministers today to be supported as they serve the Lord? The apostle Paul did indeed make tents to support himself for a time. But he later wrote *do we have no right to eat and drink...and who goes to war at his own expense?* (I Corinthians 9:4, 7). And later to Timothy he wrote quoting the Old Testament ‘you shall not muzzle the ox while it treads out the grain’ (I Timothy 5:17). So let us not be so ready to dismiss this teaching about the Levites and the tithe, even if there are preachers and evangelists who misuse this Scripture for their own gain.

## **Blessing**

A pastor I knew in India never failed to set aside a tithe from the meagre pay he received. He was truly an example to his flock – though not all were so careful in this matter. This man did not have everything this world had to offer, but his children were all educated and married in the Lord – some now in the USA.

The Lord is powerful to bless. The Lord gives the increase in the fields (14:24). He sends the rain and keeps away the pests and diseases. The Lord provides us with work and gives us health and ability to work. The tithe is a recognition of this blessing; and as they continued to obey the Lord and honour him with their tithe he said he would continue to bless them in all the work of their hands (14:29). This was the promise of the Sovereign God to his covenant people, not a suggestion that the people could manipulate God into blessing them.

After Pentecost when many believed in the Lord Jesus Christ we read of remarkable things happening in the church. Not only did the people hunger and thirst for teaching, for prayer and for fellowship, they also sold their possessions and goods and brought the proceeds to the feet of the apostles. Why did they do this? No, we are not suggesting it was a tithe, even though these people were in the habit of tithing (Matthew 23:23) – their giving was in fact way beyond a tithe. This giving shows the great thankfulness that was in their hearts. They gave freely out of love for the Lord and for the brethren.

In the new covenant we are not under law but under grace (Romans 6:14). We are not compelled to give a tenth of our income to the Lord. We are not compelled to give anything. Those who have received nothing from the Lord do not want to give anything, but those who know the great salvation of God in Jesus Christ, those who recognised his wonderful blessings in Christ, those who understand that all they have comes from the Lord, will give freely and joyfully to the Lord.

Jesus said ‘he who is forgiven much loves much’ (Luke 7). And he who loves much will give freely to the Lord. They will give of their time, their energy, their money – whatever they have. They will give themselves first to the Lord as a living sacrifice. Is this your attitude towards giving? Is this a picture of your life? Or do you give the Lord the left overs!

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