

# TITHING AND ALMSGIVING

6.5



## **Optional *Lectio Divina* Prayer**

1. Read Matthew 6:19-21.
2. Meditate on the words.
3. Speak to Christ about this passage.
4. Rest and listen in God's presence.
5. Discuss together.

**O**ur lives are not our own. They were bought with a price.

When we respond to God's call and follow him as his disciples, we welcome Jesus to be the Lord of our lives, surrendering every aspect of our existence to his Lordship. All that we do, all our relationships, and all that we have are ultimately his, and we entrust our entire lives to his loving plan. This includes our wealth.

We can see this in the way that God calls us to tithe and give alms. These two Biblical commands relate to the two Greatest Commandments that sum up the entire Christian life: love of God and love of neighbor (Mt 22:36-40). Let's consider how tithing relates to love of God and almsgiving corresponds to love of neighbor. And in the process, we will see how these two practices not only are acts of justice related to what we owe God and neighbor, but also lead us to what we're made for, union with the generous, loving heart of Christ.

## TITHING

In Scripture, a tithe is a ten per cent gift of income and produce offered to God. From the very beginning, Adam and Eve's children saw the need to offer God the first of their flock (Gen 4:4). Abraham offered God, through the priest-king Melchizedek, a tenth of all that he had (Gen 14:20). The Patriarch Jacob vowed to God, "of all that you give me I will give a tenth to you" (Gen 28:22). This most ancient Biblical practice became more specified when the tribe of the Levites were set apart to serve as priests for the people. God commanded the other tribes to offer a ten percent gift of their wealth to support the Levites in their mission of leading the people in worship (Num 18:21).

St. Thomas Aquinas explains that tithing is an act of justice. Just as society should provide for the necessities of those who serve them



(such as government officials, teachers, and soldiers), so people should support those who lead them in worship of God. To neglect tithing would be unjust, failing to give God the full worship he deserves and the full worship our hearts are made for. This is why God so strongly condemns the Israelites later in their history when they don't offer him a full tithe, accusing them of stealing from Him. Consider his words in the Book of Malachi:

"Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you will say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes into the storehouse" (Mal 3:10).

Notice how the problem is not simply a lack of giving. God recognizes that the people are offering him something. But they fail to give the full tithes—in other words, a full ten per cent of their increase. In doing so, they are not just lacking in generous giving. They are failing to give God the fullness of what is justly due to him. And this is a serious matter. As the Lord himself explains, holding back from giving a full tithe is stealing from God himself.

In the New Testament, while Jesus exhorts people not to neglect tithing (Mt 23:23), he also calls us to even more generous levels giving. This is not surprising. Since Christ raised the bar in the areas of murder, adultery, divorce, oath-swearing, revenge and love (Mt 5:21-44), it is fitting that he also summoned us to a higher standard in giving, inviting his disciples to give up everything to follow him

(Lk 14:33; Mt 19:21). This is why the early Church continued the practice of tithing, and various Church Fathers like St. Augustine and St. Jerome, as well as various Catholic teachings throughout the ages, such as the Third Council of Macron (585 AD) and the Council of Trent (1545-63 AD), reaffirmed this ancient Biblical practice and called for the faithful to continue to offer tithes. St. Thomas Aquinas explains that this continuation of the Old Testament practice of tithing in the New Covenant era makes sense, “lest the people of the New Law should give less to the ministers of the New Testament than did the people of the Old Law to the ministers of the Old Testament” (See also Mt 5:20; 2 Cor 3:7-8).<sup>1</sup>

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### DISCUSS

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*How does this vision of approaching wealth differ from what we see in the culture? How does it challenge your own approach to wealth?*

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## TESTING GOD

The Bible often teaches that we should not put the Lord to the test. But there is one passage in which God says just the opposite. When it comes to tithing, God commands us to test him. In the Book of Malachi, after the Lord calls the people to give a full tithe, he invites them to trust that he will bless them plentifully for their generosity. “Bring the full tithes into the storehouse...and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing” (Mal 3:10).

Here we see that tithing is about more than just contributing to the Church’s mission. It’s also an act of trust in God’s providential care

for our lives. Will we put God first by tithing and trust that He will provide for all our needs? Or will we rely on ourselves and cling to our own possessions? When we tithe, it's as if we're saying, "Father, I trust you with my entire life, including my resources. I give you the first 10% of my income, putting it in your hands and trusting in your promise to take care of me." In this way, we can see that tithing is not just good for the Church. It's good for us. It helps free us from self-reliance and grow in our reliance on God.

One of the earliest accounts in the Bible sheds light on this important theme of generosity and trust in the Lord. Two brothers each offered a sacrifice to God. One brother's sacrifice was pleasing to the Lord; the other's wasn't. What was the difference?

When Scripture describes Abel's offering, it goes out of its way to underscore his generosity, noting how Abel didn't just give any ordinary animal from his flock. He put God first and gave the Lord the firstlings of his flock and the preferred fatty portions. In contrast, when Bible describes Cain's offering, it simply tells us Cain gave of the fruit of the ground—not specifying the first fruits of his crop.

God received these two offerings differently: "The Lord had regard for Abel and his offering, but for Cain and his offering he had no regard" (Gen 4:4-5). Why did God accept Abel's offering but not Cain's? Because Abel gave generously. He prioritized his gift, entrusting the first of his flock to the Lord. Cain, however, did not put God first, failing to give the first fruits of his harvest. He held back and only gave after he felt he had enough for himself. The Bible later makes clear that Abel had more faith in God: "By faith Abel offered a more acceptable sacrifice than Cain" (Heb 11:4). Abel prioritized his giving, trusting that God would take care of all his needs. Cain did not have that same faith. He was hesitant to put God first. It's as if he only gave God of his spare change.

What kind of giver do you want to be? Both Abel and Cain gave something to God. One gave with faith, entrusting his entire life to the Lord and giving God the first of his flock. The other gave in fear,

clinging on to his harvest and letting go of his wealth only when he felt comfortable he could part with it. When we follow the Biblical call to prioritize giving to God and bring the full tithe to the Lord—the first 10 percent of our income—we give like Abel with faith, relying more on God to provide for our needs and not on ourselves.

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### DISCUSS

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*Why do you think God invites us to test Him in this area of our life? What would it look like to have an Abel-like faith regarding our wealth?*

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## ALMSGIVING

When it comes to entrusting our wealth to the Lord, tithing is just a beginning. In addition to bringing the full tithe to the Lord, the Bible also calls us to give to the poor and those in need. This is called almsgiving. This is one of the essential pious practices Jesus emphasizes in the Sermon on the Mount (Mt 6:2-4). If tithing is related to love of God, almsgiving is a particular expression of love of neighbor.

In underscoring the importance of almsgiving, Jesus is drawing on the longstanding Biblical tradition of providing for the poor. In fact, Proverbs 19:17 makes this provocative statement about almsgiving: “He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord.” What does this mean? How can giving to the poor be considered giving a loan to God?

First, God associates himself closely with the poor. We see this in Matthew 25 which highlights how those who provide for the sick, the hungry, the naked, the stranger and the prisoner are doing these charitable acts for Christ, who is particularly present in the poor. Jesus says, “Truly, I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me” (Mt. 25:40).



So, when we give alms to the poor, it's as if we are giving to Christ himself, who is especially present in the poor.

But how is this a loan?

Think about it: when we lend money to someone, we assume we will be repaid. So, when we're giving alms to the poor, we're ultimately giving it to God who is present in the poor. The Bible has the underlying assumption that God will pay us back. Proverbs 19:17 makes this clear in the second half of this verse: "He who is kind to the poor lends to the Lord, and he will repay him for his deed." Just like the person who tithes can expect to receive "an overflowing of blessing" (Mal 3:10), so the person who gives alms to the poor can expect to be repaid by God for his charitable deed.

This is amazing! God owes us nothing. Yet, He freely chooses to bless us abundantly for our generosity with the poor. Jesus makes this point clear when he speaks about those who give up everything and give to the poor will receive "treasure in heaven" (Mk 10:21) and those who give up everything to follow Christ will receive "a hundredfold" in this life and eternal life in the next. (Mk 10:29-30). God is trustworthy and cannot be outdone in generosity.

Almsgiving is also an act of justice. It reminds us that all our wealth and possessions, in the end, are not our own. They are entrusted to us so that we can use them not for our own selfish purposes but for the good of the kingdom. This is why St. Gregory the Great

explained, “When we attend to the needs of those in want, we give them what is theirs, not ours.”<sup>2</sup> But most of all, almsgiving is an act of love. We encounter Jesus in the poor. And the more generous we are in giving alms to the poor, the more our heart expands as we take on the generous, merciful heart of Christ. It’s no wonder that almsgiving was viewed as one of the key signs of faithfulness in the early Church.

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### DISCUSS

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*Why is almsgiving an essential aspect of Christian discipleship?  
Do you trust that God will “pay back” your loan to Him?*

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## TAKE ACTION

Take a moment and review the following:

- Your most recent budget or monthly expenses
- Your tithing and almsgiving
- Your lifestyle, asking if you are being truly generous toward God and your neighbor
- Your heart, specifically your generosity with regard wealth

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### DISCUSS

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*After reading this article, what practical steps do you need to take with regard to tithing and almsgiving?*

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