

The Beautiful Mansion of Giving

See Matthew 19: When it comes this subject it raises strong emotions, and when Jesus spoke on it, some turned back from following Him. Ask the Lord now to guard your heart!

It is a timely to bring this seeing that today is the first day of the Feast of Tabernacles, and next week, when we conclude this study, it will be the last day of the same feast. Consider what is said about the feast of Tabernacles in Deuteronomy:

Deut 16:14 **And you shall rejoice in your feast**, you and your son and your daughter, your male servant and your female servant and the Levite, the stranger and the fatherless and the widow, who are within your gates.

We live today in uncertain and difficult times. There are many reasons to not be joyful: unemployment, uncertainty about where your next meal is coming from and, in some cases, unnecessary death. How do we rejoice when all appears to be falling down around us?

This is not the first time in history that the church has faced such problems. In Acts 2 the church faces a time of famine and my conviction is that they got through it by following, in the Spirit, what they could not do in the flesh. I am talking about the biblical principles of giving in the Books of Moses, the root and foundation out of which Jesus himself taught, and I will give examples of that at the end.

I call this teaching “The beautiful Mansion of Giving.” Not a house, because with a house, you can only invite people for a barbecue, and knowing British weather, it will rain on them and then you send them home with a doggy bag filled with chicken that is 50% charcoal. But with a mansion you can have many guests come and stay because you have many bedrooms, a roof, and can afford provisions for all.

In the modern world, the beauty of giving has been replaced by a number: 10%. However, the Bible has a lot to say about giving over and above the Abrahamic gift to Melchizedek. This structure I have likened to a Mansion because it is the foundation, the walls and the roof of the wellbeing of a congregation, whether that be the congregation of the Children of Israel, or the congregation of the church. When done right, it brings the church much closer to the vision of the Acts 2 church. When done wrong, it leads to exposure, distress and poverty.

Proposal

The book of Nehemiah exposes some of this structure beautifully. This month, Nehemiah is on our daily bible readings, so be sure to grab a copy of the monthly Information booklet from our website and follow along.

First let's read a portion from Nehemiah 12:44-47

⁴⁴ And at the same time some were appointed over the rooms of **the storehouse for the offerings, the firstfruits, and the tithes**, to gather into them from the fields of the cities the portions specified by the Law for the priests and Levites; for Judah rejoiced over the priests and Levites who ministered. ⁴⁵ Both the singers and the gatekeepers kept the charge of their God and the charge of the purification, according to the command of David and Solomon his son. ⁴⁶ For in the days of David and Asaph of old there were chiefs of the singers, and songs of praise and thanksgiving to God. ⁴⁷ In the days of Zerubbabel and in the days of Nehemiah **all Israel gave the portions for the singers**

and the gatekeepers, a portion for each day. They also consecrated holy things for the Levites, and the Levites consecrated them for the children of Aaron.

To be clear, both the singers and gatekeeper—who were Levites—were provided for out of the tithes and offerings for which the storehouses were prepared.

Now to see how important this storehouse really was, we must look at Nehemiah 13.

⁴ Now before this, Eliashib the priest, having authority over the storerooms of the house of our God, was allied with Tobiah. ⁵ And he had prepared for him a large room, where previously they had stored the grain offerings, the frankincense, the articles, the tithes of grain, the new wine and oil, which were commanded to be given to the Levites and singers and gatekeepers, and the offerings for the priests.

So the situation was that whilst Nehemiah has been called back to be with the king, the person in charge of the storehouse had allied himself with Tobiah, who, if you remember, did everything in his power to discourage, disempower, and disrupt the lives and work of the Jews in Jerusalem. And instead of using the storehouse for storing the tithes and offering, it was given as an apartment to Tobiah.

The knock-on effect was that no portions had been given to the Levites, singers and gatekeepers. So instead of ministering to the people, they had gone out to the fields to work in order to live. Imagine a church service without worship, and with no pastors to lead it. Who would come to church? What would happen?

The gates were particularly important: With no gatekeepers, the city was open to attack at night. More importantly, they were open on the Sabbath: The day the people were supposed to be resting and turning their attention towards God. Traders from Tobiah's people came in and encouraged the people to break the Sabbath. What is not mentioned here is that the gates were where business was transacted, and justice was sought. Without the gatekeepers and the Levites and Priests who judged the people, injustice would have been allowed to go unpunished. The people would not have had the Word of the Lord spoken to them, and they would have drifted away from the Lord.

No storehouse: No revival. In order to fix the situation and trigger revival, Nehemiah did one thing: Throw out Tobiah and restore the storehouse. Everything else trickled down from there.

The Detail

You see there is a lot that the Bible had to say about Tithes and Offering outside of Genesis 14 (Abraham and Melchizedek) and the 10%. So much so, it's almost an insult to giving to reduce it to a percentage.

Now to understand the scriptures that follow, you must understand the context: Israel was an agricultural community. God's promises to Israel in Exodus 6 were thus: (summarized)

- I will bring you out from under the burdens
- I will rescue you from their bondage
- I will redeem you with power
- I will take you as My people
- **I will bring you into the land which I swore to give to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob and give it to you as a heritage**

It's the last one I want to draw your attention to. Land is life. Left alone, the land can produce food for people to subsist on. Ask any Jamaican if I am lying. Deuteronomy 8:11-17 demands that the Israelites remember that it was God who was giving them this land, and for the generations to come, that is was God who had caused them to be in that prosperous land. It adjures them to not forget that it was the Lord who did this, lest they think 'My power and the might of my hand have gained me this wealth.' (Deut. 8:17b)

In a very real sense, both for the Israelite and for us today, the prosperity that we find ourselves in today has not been achieved by our own sweat and blood. This is despite how we feel, being under the curse of Adam—but that is another teaching. We are where we are today by the privilege of the power of God in our lives. Likewise, when Israel forgot the Lord, they found themselves in the place of exile after much grace had been extended to them. We too can find ourselves in a bad place if we forget the Lord in the same way that Eliashab the priest, keeper of the Storeroom of Nehemiah's Jerusalem also forgot the Lord and His instruction. The people then, and our family today, suffer as a result.

What does the Lord's instruction have to say about giving?

Deut 8:18 "And you shall remember the Lord your God, for it is He who gives you power to get wealth, that He may establish (or confirm) His covenant which He swore to your fathers, as it is this day."

The first major fact to establish about giving is that it comes from something that we have. The question of ownership of what we have arises. Is that which we have owned by ourselves for us to have ultimate control over where it goes?

Even in the present world we are forced to acknowledge that this is not true. In the modern world we do not have to worry about what to do with our trash, or our sewage. We do not have to be concerned about our transport to the place where we earn our pay. We eagerly pay for a car that travels on mostly well-maintained roads, or begrudgingly to use the bus or train to go to work. So much of our earned wage is possible because of the protection, work and order of the government/municipality that we are obliged to pay taxes.

This too is a Biblical principal. Not only is it written to the Israelites, that when they set up a king over themselves, they must pay a certain percentage to him, and cause their sons and daughter to serve him; it is also recorded that Jesus encouraged the payment of taxes, even to an occupying force like Rome. Now, that has got to grate with people, but it is the way our God wants us to live.

Paul, in his book to the Romans (Rom 13:1-7) encourages the Church to be subject to (note: different to obedience to) the authorities for the simple fact that no authority exists except that which are appointed by God. Therefore, each person should not fear the authority, but to do good. He also echoes Jesus's teachings in that taxes should be paid.

And so, this principal applies to us in the spiritual as well. If we earn wealth, we do not earn it because of our own power (indeed, if we do not work, and we are poor we can blame none but ourselves) we earn it because of the gifts and situation we are in at the hand of God. Israel 'inherited' a land and with it all its natural and worked produce.

#1 What we have was given to us, not earned!

Once we have this in place, we have the foundations of a mansion.

This one truth transforms a multitude of viewpoints on some very sensitive issues, but we are going to concentrate on our prosperity.

Num 18:21 “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting...”

Let us put Numbers into perspective. The narrative of numbers takes place between 1 year after the arrival at Mount Sinai and arriving at the border of the Promised Land opposite Jericho 40 years afterwards.

The books of Exodus and Leviticus describe what happens from Egypt to Mount Sinai, the year of preparation and the receiving of the pattern of things to come, including the tabernacle. Numbers marks a watershed moment from being a people in expectance, to a people of realisation. Before Numbers, they are a mixed multitude with no form or shape, no culture, borrowed gods and borrowed ways of living, but at Mount Sinai they receive their culture, their order, and their governance.

In Numbers, each person is counted ‘by name’ with the head of families having their name recorded. Each family is ordered in their tribe with purpose. Governance and structure are established. The first Passover after leaving Egypt is celebrated after the Tabernacle is erected and God’s manifest presence appeared over it as a pillar of smoke by day, and a pillar of fire by night.

Part of this structure, this God-given culture, was the provision for the Levites. Now who were these people and why were the people instructed to give a tithe to them?

The tribe of the Levites were the sons of Levi, the third son of Jacob. This is the tribe from whom came Moses and Aaron, whose descendants served as Priests before God. The final plague that caused Pharaoh to release the Israelites was the death of the first born. Upon leaving, the Lord instructed that the firstborn of all flesh, both man and beast, should belong to Him, and therefore the Israelites were to dedicate their firstborn to God. However, later, the Lord makes a trade:

Numbers 3:11-13 ¹¹ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² “Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, ¹³ because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the Lord.”

This is in keeping with the reorganising of the company of Israel and the establishment of each person’s purpose. Instead of having land as an inheritance, the Lord gave them the tithe so that they could do the work of the tabernacle. (Num 18:21-24) And of that tithe, they gave a tithe to the priests and could then do what they liked with the rest.

What was the work of the Levites?

The Levites took care of the needs of the Priests so that they could concentrate on their role. They were also:

- Worship leaders
- Construction engineers and Maintenance workers for the Temple/Tabernacle
- Teachers
- Judges

- Later, as the Hebrew language of the people evolved, they were translators and commentary givers when the Word was read in public
- Guards (keeping the City Gates, for example, which in those times were places of judgement and business)

In them were the responsibility for Educate, execute Justice, protect Law and Order, facilitate Business, empower Worship in society. Imagine a society without these things? The tithe provided for all of that. These are the walls of the mansion. They protected and formed their social structure. If the tithe was not given, justice would fail, education would fail, people would get poorer, business would be harder to do and the people would fall away from God.

#2 The tithe provides for the basic cohesion of society and draws it closer to God

But that's not the end of the story for giving.

The tithe was to be provided six years out of seven. What happened in the seventh year?

Lev 25:1-7 ¹ And the Lord spoke to Moses on Mount Sinai, saying, ² "Speak to the children of Israel, and say to them: 'When you come into the land which I give you, then the land shall keep a sabbath to the Lord. ³ Six years you shall sow your field, and six years you shall prune your vineyard, and gather its fruit; ⁴ but in the seventh year there shall be a sabbath of solemn rest for the land, a sabbath to the Lord. You shall neither sow your field nor prune your vineyard. ⁵ What grows of its own accord of your harvest you shall not reap, nor gather the grapes of your untended vine, for it is a year of rest for the land. ⁶ And the sabbath produce of the land shall be food for you: for you, your male and female servants, your hired man, and the stranger who dwells with you, ⁷ for your livestock and the beasts that are in your land—all its produce shall be for food.

One of the identification marks of Israel's relationship to the Lord God was the Sabbath. It was a day of rest that signified trust in God. The land was given to Israel on the basis that it belonged to the Lord, and that identification carried through to the seventh year sabbath of the land. No farming was to be done, and therefore no increase, and no tithe. Anything that grew of its own accord was food for everyone and everything.

There is an obvious enough question that rises out of this:

Lev 25:20-22 ²⁰ 'And if you say, "What shall we eat in the seventh year, since we shall not sow nor gather in our produce?"' ²¹ Then I will command My blessing on you in the sixth year, and it will bring forth produce enough for three years. ²² And you shall sow in the eighth year, and eat old produce until the ninth year; until its produce comes in, you shall eat of the old harvest.

The promise of having enough is given on the basis of obedience to allowing everyone else to eat off the land that lies fallow. In other words, it is based on the principle of generosity first being blessed in advance.

Generosity is one of the key mandates in the Torah that appears again and again. For example, you are not to work the ground to the bone, squeezing every last grain from the land. The idea is that you would leave corners to allow the poor of the land to gather from them.

Lev 23:22 'When you reap the harvest of your land, you shall not wholly reap the corners of your field when you reap, nor shall you gather any gleaning from your harvest. You shall leave them for the poor and for the stranger: I am the Lord your God.' "

Leviticus has a lot to say about giving, though it hides it well. The first few chapters of Leviticus talk a lot about the prescriptions of the Offerings that were brought before the Lord. What can be easily missed is who benefits from these offerings:

Lev 2:10 And what is left of the grain offering shall be Aaron's and his sons'. It is most holy of the offerings to the Lord made by fire.

The offerings consist of a few things: first fruits, sin offerings, trespass offerings, reparations, offerings made upon completions of vows, upon the birth of a child, and free will offerings. These provided sustenance for the Priests who stood in the place of providing ultimate justice and prophetic authority, aided by the Levites who were provided for under the tithe.

These offerings were often means-tested. Those who could afford brought bulls, the poorest a pair of doves. But bring them, they did.

In the generous provision was revealed the trust of the one who gave of his land to feed both the poor and the priest.

#3 Generosity reveals the trust in the Lord to provide 'enough'

Then there was mandated a second tithe.

Deut 14:22-23 ²² "You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year. ²³ And you shall eat before the Lord your God, in the place where He chooses to make His name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil, of the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, that you may learn to fear the Lord your God always.

This tithe was to be gathered and stored. It was to be used at the Feast of Tabernacles, where you ate and drank as much as your heart desired and shared it with everyone. There was not meant to be an empty stomach in the land for those eight days of any of the categories of people throughout society: The servant, the Levite, the poor, the stranger. In fact, it was the one feast of all the feasts where you were commanded to be joyful and it was the one that involved giving freely.

Why this feast? The Feast of Tabernacles was initiated as a remembrance of the years that the children of Israel dwelt in the tents in the desert. What is implied and what actually happened was that though they dwelt in tents, the Manifest Presence of God also dwelt among them in a tent made of skin. If we look forward based on the last writings of some of the prophets, and in the revelation, we see a future time where sadness is a thing of the past, where God dwells among His people. It is a hope that everyone, even in the direst of circumstance, can look forward to.

This was for two years. In the third year (Deut 14:28-29) the second tithe was gathered and taken to the city gate for distribution to the poor. Who managed the gates, and therefore the distribution of this tithe? The Levites to whom you gave your first tithe. Without giving the first, there would be no one to manage the second.

As with the first tithe, you were not expected to provide a tithe while you did not sow nor reap during the seventh year.

#4 The sharing the second tithe provides us with a glimpse of what our future will be like, where abject poverty and sadness is banished

Finally, in all of this, there is something that is missing. How did you maintain the Temple? None of the tithes and offering went to the maintenance of the Tabernacle or the Temple. How was it maintained? Not by a tithe, but by census.

Exodus 30:11-16 ¹¹ Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: ¹² “When you take the census of the children of Israel for their number, then every man shall give a ransom for himself to the Lord, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. ¹³ This is what everyone among those who are numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (a shekel is twenty gerahs). The half-shekel shall be an offering to the Lord. ¹⁴ Everyone included among those who are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering to the Lord. ¹⁵ The rich shall not give more and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when you give an offering to the Lord, to make atonement for yourselves. ¹⁶ And you shall take the atonement money of the children of Israel, and shall appoint it for the service of the tabernacle of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the children of Israel before the Lord, to make atonement for yourselves.”

How do you count a people without actually counting the people? You make each person give an exact prescribed offering. When you count the offering, you discover the number of the people. Each person’s ransom was half a shekel. In today’s money it would be around £250. A rich person was to bring no more, and poor person would give no less.

This practice of not counting is taken very seriously that even today in Synagogues there is a process to avoid counting Israel: Each prayer meeting requires a minimum of ten family heads. So how do you check that you have enough men without counting? They say a verse from the Word, each person saying one word. If the verse is completed, they have enough to start the meeting.

We are told that every time we want to count the people, we incur a curse on ourselves for not trusting God. Therefore, the money given was a ransom for each person’s life to avoid the curse. King David forgot this, and a plague decimated his kingdom until he made an offering before the Lord which stopped the plague.

There is a lot you can take from this in terms of the value of a person—not that it can be measured, this was but a ransom amount—but that each person was valued equally from the wealthy to the poor. The giving was about trust in the Lord, for the upkeep of the meeting place that God himself had chosen to dwell.

#5 It is each person’s ransom amount that was given in trust for the upkeep of the place of meeting, not extravagant gifts

Conclusion

What do we say to conclude? Two tithes and many offerings. No work one year in seven and trust that God would provide you with enough.

What Moses was given regarding giving provides at its most basic level for the establishment of the Justice System, Education, Welfare, and the Worship of Almighty God. It goes on to then to create walls that protect the foundation (offerings that raise the provision above the basic plumb line) and a protective roof covering those in poverty (the second tithe and the gleanings.)

The consideration of whether a person gives ten percent after or before tax is thinking like the pharisees, whom Jesus rebuked for giving a tithe of their herbs but putting the weightier matters of justice aside. Our giving should go beyond a percentage. Our storehouses should be big enough to carry us through the Sabbath year, no bigger, and our generosity should be towards the covering of our brethren and the protection of our faith.

Consider now Jesus’s parable of the rich fool from Luke 12.

Luke 12:16-21 ¹⁶ Then He spoke a parable to them, saying: “The ground of a certain rich man yielded plentifully. ¹⁷ And he thought within himself, saying, ‘What shall I do, since I have no room to store my crops?’ ¹⁸ So he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build greater, and there I will store all my crops and my goods. ¹⁹ And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have many goods laid up for many years; take your ease; eat, drink, and be merry.’” ²⁰ But God said to him, ‘Fool! This night your soul will be required of you; then whose will those things be which you have provided?’

²¹ “So is he who lays up treasure for himself, and is not rich toward God.”

The Rich Fool made the mistake of forgetting from Whom his wealth came from and what it’s purpose was. Being Rich towards God reflects Jesus’s words “I was hungry and you fed me; I was thirsty and you gave me drink; naked and you clothed me.”

It is not a crime to be rich. It is many times said that to enjoy the fruits of our labours is a gift from God. The crime is being rich and thinking that the wealth is there for your comfort, and that your brilliance somehow caused it to come into being, or that your wealth should somehow mark you out or make you more prominent in the community. Plaques and memorials with donors’ names are their own reward and have no reward in heaven.

The wealth that God gives you must be used to ensure the establishment of faith, and the protection of your brethren from abject poverty. If you give freely of that which is given to you, in faith, then the Lord will always ensure that you have enough.

Finally, consider the Acts 2 Church (Acts 2:40-47) in which it was said:

⁴⁴ Now all who believed were together, and had all things in common, ⁴⁵ and sold their possessions and goods, and divided them among all, as anyone had need.

⁴⁶ So continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, they ate their food with gladness and simplicity of heart, ⁴⁷ praising God and having favour with all the people. **And the Lord added to the church daily those who were being saved.**

The continuing cry throughout the prophets’ writings was that Israel abandoned justice and set aside the Sabbath years, refused to relinquish property in the Jubilee year, and oppressed their brethren. When the Spirit came, what could not be done in the flesh was prompted in the Spirit. The carnal still fought against that (remember Ananias and Saphira) but could not overcome the Spirit of the Jerusalem church that finally fulfilled the vision of Moses in love, so we must guard our hearts. Note that is our giving that leads to the Lord bringing the increase into the Church.

Brethren, hear the yearning of the Spirit, and learn to trust the Lord in your giving.

Reminder:

#1 What we have is given to us, not earned

#2 The first tithe provides for the basic cohesion of society and draws it closer to God

#3 Generosity reveals the trust in the Lord to provide ‘enough’

#4 The sharing the second tithe provides us with a glimpse of what our future will be like, where abject poverty and sadness is banished

#5 It is each person’s ransom amount that was given in trust for the upkeep of the place of meeting, not extravagant gifts

