



November 17, 2013

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An Acceptable Sacrifice – Romans 12:1

This is the third year we've used this annual giving model. You've heard three announcements from fellow parishioners about giving. Today I'm supposed to present a message about proportional giving, but I have more to say, so let's get that out of the way up front.

There are three parts to this message: the first, an explanation of that swear word, *tithe*; the second, a history of sacrifice and God's purpose in commanding sacrifice; and the third, why you should care, because you should.

A few years ago, one of you asked me several times in several different ways, "What is a tithe?" Now, my pastoral practice concerning issues that evoke wide ranges of opinion has been to recognize that there are points of faith and practice that people of sound mind, reasonable nature, and deep devotion disagree upon, and rather than simply state my own personal position (which, by the way, can change as I grow in my own faith and understanding), I generally prefer to offer several perspectives and see which we can most helpfully examine more fully.

So, asked about the tithe, I replied that it's usually considered to be ten percent, but there is debate about whether that's pretax income, whether it includes investments, total giving or just to the church, etc.

But still he kept asking. I know I never provided the answer he was looking for. So, this is what is meant by "tithe:" I and my family return something slightly over ten percent of what you pay me for salary and housing back to Valley Presbyterian Church. To start. Then we contribute to other causes through and outside the church, my college and seminary, and other groups. That is what I believe is a "tithe."

But there is more to this. What is usually described as a "Biblical tithe," ten percent of your total income, is really the Jewish practice. That was used to support the worship of God, the priests, and good works – but God's people were always expected to give generously over and above that. It was the baseline to support God's work on earth.

In Islam, there is the *zakat*. It is ten percent of your *net worth*, annually – quite a bit more than the Jewish tithe, for many people.

The problem is when we get to Jesus. That's not uncommon; Jesus tends to confound our common sense and set rules pretty regularly. The "tithe" of the New Testament is not ten percent of your income, nor is it ten percent of your net worth: it is one hundred percent. Now, Jesus never says that in so many words, but you all know where it's implied. Think of Jesus calling disciples: Peter, James, John, Phillip, Nathaniel,

Matthew, and all the others who just dropped what they were doing and followed him; the rich young ruler whom we're told Jesus loved – and told to give all he had to the poor and follow him; the widow, with her two coins, which, as Jesus said, were “all she had to live on,” but which she put in the offering box. Jesus wants one hundred percent – but not just your possessions: he wants one hundred percent of *you*.

So, with Jesus, the question becomes not, how much should I give in Christ's name and service? But rather, *how much do I keep?*

The cards you received last week showed on one side what various percentages looked like, based on income. Generosity is, as you've heard me say many times, a spiritual discipline; one of the four that we teach in this church as marks of the well-rounded disciple's life. The first is Glorify - worship; the second, Grow - study, prayer and devotion; the fourth is Go - spread the good news outside these walls; and the third is Give, the *spiritual discipline* of generosity. A simple, easy-to-follow path to cultivating this spiritual discipline is to give a percentage of what God has given you, and that's what proportional giving is about.

So, prayerfully consider giving in proportion to your income, and if you already do, consider what God is calling you to do next year – adjust? If so, up or down? I recommend you consider increasing proportionally, which I have done: either by ten percent each year, what I call “tithing your gift,” or even one percent. It's a simple calculation.

There. That's done. But what does that have to do with those who have just a tenuous faith? Or Paul's "acceptable sacrifice," acceptable not to our personal budgets, but to God?

In the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament, sacrifices were a way of life, quite literally. The people were commanded to give the first-born of animals, the first-fruits of harvest, and return them to God. God even says in Leviticus 27 that they actually ARE God's – if you want to keep them, you must pay the priests not just their value, but an additional twenty percent!

Something curious about those sacrifices: not only were they to be the best, but often completely destroyed: burned. Now, some were kept to support the priests and the poor; but most were just burned up, thrown away. Any farmer or breeder knows that the best, the perfect specimen, is the most valuable; the future of your crops and livestock depends on using the best for breeding or seed.

That's precisely what they were called to destroy as a sacrifice.

While that may not make sense on the surface, down deep it accomplishes a key purpose of God: by giving up the best you've got, you have to depend on God to keep you going.

I believe God is engaged in a continual process of training humanity, and that this old system of sacrifice, which we've long abandoned, was an early step in this training: a big improvement over

the pagan custom of sacrificing children. What God *now* offers us in Christianity is a sacrifice of the spirit, but because spiritual things are not tangible, we continue to be encouraged to sacrifice – just that now our sacrifices aren't burnt to ash, they are put at the service of the Kingdom – through our offerings.

God gives in Psalm 50 an early example of drawing humanity toward this goal set for us in Christ: “Every wild animal of the forest is mine, the cattle on a thousand hills. I know all the birds of the air, and all that moves in the field is mine. If I were hungry I would not tell you, for the world and all that is in it is mine. Do I eat the flesh of bulls, or drink the blood of goats? Offer to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, and pay your vows to the Most High. Call on me in the day of trouble; I will deliver you, and you shall glorify me.” (vv 10-15)

If the true Christian tithe is one hundred percent – since, after all, everything belongs to God – then our lives and all we have ought to be put at God's service, through our worship, our time, our prayers, our resources... everything. And what is that service? Love God. Love your neighbor. Be good innkeepers, stewards of what's put in your trust, and *prove it*.

To make it simple: the big difference between Old and New Testament sacrifices is this: in the old, they were taking the best, and throwing it away. Under the new, we take it *all*, and offer it to God's

use. That's God, always training humanity, drawing us into the reality of God's new covenant, God's love. Now, why should you care?

In the very last book of the OT, Malachi, God tells his people this: "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house. Test me in this...see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven for you and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." (3:10)

Put God to the test. That requires trust. Trust and Faith are not quite the same, but real, mature faith depends on trust. I think of the beginning of Psalm 3: "O Lord, how many are my foes! How many rise up against me!" But then David turns around – as he so often does, once he's thrown off the burden that's on his heart – and says this: "I lie down and sleep; I wake up again, for the Lord sustains me." In case we didn't get the point, he says it again in the next psalm: "I will lie down and sleep in peace, for you alone, O Lord, make me dwell in safety." Every time we fall asleep, we lose control of our world; asleep, we can no longer keep all the balls in the air, the plates spinning on sticks, the people we think we manage under control.

At that point, we either surrender to chaos, without our hand on the wheel, or we trust that the world will keep on turning. That trust is a building block for faith, the faith that David expressed: we lie down and rest, really rest, because we know that God is ultimately in control.

This translates into waking life. If God's in control while we sleep, then isn't God in control while we're awake? If God continues to keep the world spinning after a great tragedy, can't we find the faith to believe that God will keep things going without *our* direct, hands-on control?

Those who offered their sacrifices in ancient times did so as an act of faith, that God *would* maintain those who put their trust in his control. It is no different for you and me: either we have to keep our finger on every event, our hand in every pot, or we trust – and build faith – that God has everything in *his* hand, *his* plan.

Three “ifs.” If God works all things together for good for those who love and trust him – as Paul tells us in Romans 8:28 – then we can relax and let God be God. If God *doesn't*, then it's time to start worrying. Either God is good and in control, or it all – ALL – depends on *you*.

If God can take any mess, any mistake, any waste or wreck or anything, and turn it into a thing of beauty and meaning – Scripture's full of this, from creation of everything from nothing to humanity from mud to Jesus Christ born to a teenager in a cattle trough – then you can safely entrust your life and God's other gifts to you back to God.

So, the question you have to work on this week as we prepare to consecrate our intentions of giving next Sunday is really about your faith, trust, and sacrifice.

C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic *Chronicles of Narnia* a scene where the character Lucy encounters the Lion, Aslan, a metaphor for God, after not seeing him for some time. “Aslan,” she [says], “you’re bigger.” “That is because you are older, little one,” [he answered]. “Not because *you* are?” “I am not. But every year you grow, you will find me bigger.”

So it is as we grow in faith, trust, and generosity: as we mature in these spiritual gifts, God seems bigger; and we – well, we become bigger too, spiritually stronger, but paradoxically smaller in relation to God’s bigness, greatness, goodness, Lordship. We know God’s got this.

For those who cannot see life with gratitude, the world - because they cannot see it as God’s world - is a place that’s a mess, full of misery, mistakes, and limits. But in giving generously, in acknowledging God’s goodness and gifts, we can see the amazing goodness that God is, and that God works.

This is a whole new way to live. Many of you already practice it. But for those who don’t, who are listening to my rambling on with half an ear and wondering about lunch, well, listen up for a second: try faith. What could it hurt? Try God’s way, especially if yours hasn’t been working all that well. It begins with acknowledging Christ as Lord, and

“present[ing] your bod[y – yourself] as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God. That is your spiritual worship.”