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## “Keeping the Tithe”

Sermon Series: “ Keeping Your Edge”

Sunday, October 14, 2007©

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Scripture Lesson: *Leviticus 27:30-33*

Keep the tithe and keep your edge. Let us pray.

*Gracious God and loving Father, we thank you for the gifts which you pour into our lives. You are good and loving and giving beyond measure, Lord. Fill us with your Word this morning to help live as gifted people for your glory. We pray this in Jesus' name. Amen.*

For the last few weeks we have been talking about keeping our edge. We have looked at the teaching from Leviticus which states, “when you harvest your land you shall not reap your field all the way to the edge.” This is not where we are today. We live in a society which preaches “Take it to the limit,” “Get it today,” “Why deny yourself.” Nowhere is this lifestyle more pervasive than with regard to money. With consumer debt at an all time high—increasing by \$1000 dollars nationally each minute—and the total household debt in this country reaching more than 7 Trillion dollars, when it comes to money we are not just harvesting our field right up to edge, we are actually going into our neighbor’s field and reaping their crop as well.<sup>1</sup> We are borrowing more than ever to live not just out to the edge—we are living beyond the edge.

But as a people, by and large, we don’t have an earning problem. We have a spending problem. Now I know this may be less true for some of you. I know a few of you who are looking for work or your current

job simply does not pay much. Or you are trying to pay off debt. But by and large, as a people, we feel tremendous pressure to earn and expand our harvest because we are living with our money right out to the very edge and even beyond.

What I want to do this morning is give a simple Biblical overview of God’s plan for spending.

God’s plan for spending starts with the basic principle which we talked about last week. That God is Lord and He is the owner of all. *Psalms 24:1* “The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein.” All that has been given into our possession, we are to hold as managers, as stewards, not as owners.

And like any good boss—and He is a great boss—God has given his stewards, his managers, instructions as to how to administer His gifts. His instructions begin with the fundamental teaching of “the tithe.” What is the tithe? The tithe is the basic teaching that one-tenth of what we have been given, we are to give back to God. *Leviticus 27:30 and 32*, “Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is holy to the LORD...And every tithe of herds and flocks, every tenth animal of all that pass under the herdsman's staff, shall be holy to the LORD.”

Now some of you may be saying, “I’ve never heard this before. Is this some obscure teaching that the Pastor is dragging up because of the capital campaign? Is this some archaic Old Testament legal requirement, long since cast away, like not eating rock badger or ostrich or the tawny owl, or wearing garments made from two different kinds of fiber? No. The tithe is taught throughout Scripture—Old and New Testaments—and it has been taught always and everywhere in the church. So why haven’t some of us heard about it? I think it is because in the church we are uncomfortable talking about money and possessions. To some, it seems to cross some line of an inalienable right to privacy. Jesus taught more often about money and possessions than he did heaven or sexuality or even lying, murder and honoring our parents.

Why? Jesus was a carpenter not an accountant. However, Jesus knows that how we regard our money and possessions is a key indicator of the condition of our heart. Jesus Himself taught, “*For where your treasure is, there will be your heart also.*” *Matthew 6:21, Luke 12:34.* God’s greatest concern is for your heart. And He knows that often holding sway over our hearts is not our love for Him but a love of the things of this world. When we are consumed in all our waking hours with making money, we worship and bow down to the created rather than the Creator. (*Romans 1:25*) God knows that there is nothing more destructive to our lives than allowing our love for the things of this world to overwhelm our love for Him.

The proof of this, I think, is how discussions about money and possessions seem to generate incredible passion. The way we handle our money speaks straight to the condition of our heart. One of the ugliest moments in Jen’s and my marriage came during our second year of wedded bliss while

we were out shopping. There is certain cereal which I really love which comes in a small box. You can really only get about three or four bowls out of it before the box runs dry. To make matters worse, it is very expensive. Jen and I live by a budget and when I put this box of cereal into the cart, she said, “It’s so expensive. Can’t you get something else?” And she gestured to a cheaper variety, the kind that comes in the big plastic bags with a kangaroo or a clown or a gorilla on the front and costs about .79 cents a bushel. I nearly exploded, “You and I make tens of thousands of dollars a year, and you are telling me I can’t afford a bowl of my favorite cereal?” And I stormed off to another part of the store. That is not a breakfast food problem. That is not even a relationship problem. That is a heart problem. But I think she is better now...

So, in the interest of our marriages and our hearts, please allow me this morning to give a little lesson in Biblical economics. Biblical economics is built upon two foundational truths. First, God is the owner of everything. All that we have comes from God.

Secondly, it is built upon the tithe; the principle of giving the firstfruits of our harvest to God not because God needs the money. Remember it’s His anyway. We don’t tithe because it earns our salvation. We are saved by grace through faith, not by anything we might do, lest anyone boast. (*Ephesians 2:8-9*) We don’t even tithe because the Church needs the money. The Church is not a charity. The Church is in fact the direct opposite of a charity. Charities usually receive what people no longer need. The Church should receive our firstfruits. A charity exists because of the pity and favor of human beings. The Church exists because God calls her into being. As long as a Church stays connected to Jesus Christ and is committed to raising up strong disciples and sharing the Gospel with those who do not

know Jesus Christ, she will bear fruit regardless if her budget is ten dollars or ten million dollars. We tithe because we are grateful to God and want to offer Him our hearts, and we trust and believe in God to bless us more than we trust and believe in ourselves.

Biblical economics teaches that if we have ten dollars, it has come from God.<sup>2</sup> He has literally given it to us to use in this world. God teaches that the first thing we should do with that ten dollars is give one back to Him. This is the basic meaning of firstfruit. And this leaves us with nine. And this nine, if we stop to consider it, seems like a lot. God probably deserves more. After all, every good and perfect gift in our life has come from God. God has given us salvation, redemption, unmitigated love, unwavering grace. God gave His only Son as a ransom for our sins. When you consider all of this, one dollar out of ten may not seem like enough. But this is all that God asks for.

The next dollar Scripture teaches should go to savings. Part of the reason that we don't harvest our field all the way to the edge is that we do not know what we may need to meet the challenges of tomorrow. Scripture consistently teaches that the wise do not live all the way out to the financial edge, setting some aside for a less prosperous time.

The next two dollars or thereabouts go to our taxes. God has established the government for our protection and our good, to keep order in this world, to save us from those who would do harm. For that reason, the Bible teaches that we are to pay our taxes, even if we do not agree with our leaders. They are God's grace for us. This is sometimes hard to believe, I know, but it's what Scripture teaches.

This leaves us with six dollars. The next dollar or maybe more, should go to debt. Scripture teaches us to pay our debts as promptly as we can without dragging our feet, because when we are in debt we are enslaved. *Proverbs 22:7* teaches that "*the borrower is the slave of the lender.*"

Anything to which we are a slave in this world compromises our ability to serve God.

Now we have left over to spend at our discretion maybe five out of ten dollars. If we have no debt, then six out of ten dollars. This is God's plan for us to have abundance by not harvesting our field all the way to the edge.

Many of us live in exactly the opposite way. Rather than giving God our firstfruits, we present to Him what remains at the bottom of the barrel. We take our firstfruits and spend them first on ourselves and then we add to that taxes, retirement plans, tuition, debt, unforeseen expenses. Is it any wonder that instead of getting what is right, God receives what is left? But God is not the victim here. Remember it all belongs to Him and He will get His due in one way or another. We are the victims because we have cast aside God's plan to give us abundance, and tried to achieve abundance by taking our harvest all the way out the edge of the field, wondering why we always feel so pressured.

But don't take my word for all this. I'm the preacher. I get paid to teach this. I want to invite (Darryl Smith, Paul Hartfield) to talk about how their decision to keep the tithe has changed their lives and the lives of their families.<sup>3</sup>

Allow me to make one final point this morning as we close. The tithe is also God's invitation to be his partner in this world. If every household tithed at the Presbyterian Church of Stanley, according to the median

income in the three zip codes in which most of our members live, our annual budget would be over \$5 million. Currently our giving is about one fifth of that. Could you imagine how we could, with a five million dollar budget, partner with Jesus Christ to impact our community and the world for Him?

Christ told a parable about His partnership with us. A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, where he fell among robbers. They stripped him and beat him and left him for dead. Along came a priest. He saw him, but he passed to the other side. A Levite saw him and did the same thing. But then a Samaritan came and he bandaged his wounds, pouring on them oil and wine, and then he placed the man on his own animal and took him to an inn where he continued to take care of him. He gave the innkeeper about two days wages and said to him, *“Take care of this man and whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.”* Luke 10:31

I believe Christ works a lot like the Samaritan in this parable, and we’re a lot like the innkeeper. He makes us his partner in healing a broken world. God lays His charge on our heart, inviting us, *“Take care of this broken man, this woman, this sinner, this community who needs grace and love untold,”* And *“whatever more you spend, I will repay you when I come back.”*

I know that for many of you, given your current circumstances, the idea of a tithe seems preposterous, outrageous, impossible. We cannot give to God as we know we ought because we have lived in ways He said we should not. But this is Christ’s promise to you. *“I am making all things new. I am restoring sight to the blind, proclaiming liberty to the captives, setting free those who are oppressed. Follow me and become my partner in this great and glorious work. Follow me and I will repay you in ways which you could never*

*imagine.”* It is costly work, it is sacrificial, it causes us to live for God first and ourselves last. It sometimes denies us the most superficial desires of our hearts. But we are promised by Christ that whatever we spend as we partner with him in this great and grand ambition, however much of our harvest we leave in the field, He will repay.

Keep the tithe and keep your edge.

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<sup>1</sup> Howard Dayton, *Biblical Financial Study* (Gainesville, GA: Crown Financial Ministries, 2003) p.35

<sup>2</sup> In the sermon preached in the sanctuary on Sunday, October 14 I used ten one dollar bills as a visual illustration of this. I am indebted for this illustration to Andy Stanley, the Senior Pastor of North Point Community Church, Buckhead Church, and Browns Bridge Community Church. Andy Stanley used this method in his sermon “Reordering Your Finances.”

<sup>3</sup> At this point in the sermon Darryl Smith (8:15 and 9:30 services) and Paul Hartfield (11:00 service) shared a testimony of how tithing has impacted their lives. These wonderful testimonies are available in the audio version on our website, [www.stanleypres.org](http://www.stanleypres.org).