

Alive Ministries -- Our Beliefs on Giving (10 31 19)

We believe that the act of giving is one that reflects the heart of God. The Bible tells us that God expressed His deep love for the world by **giving** His only begotten son (John 3:16), and that out of that same heart of generosity for those He loves, he continues to graciously give us all things (Romans 8:32). His fatherly goodness is demonstrated by His consistent actions of giving good gifts to His children through the Spirit (Matt.7:11). Freely, we have been given all that we need for life and godliness (2 Pet. 1:3) through the generous love of God. If we value these gifts that God has given us, our natural response is to freely give our lives to Him as living sacrifices of grateful worship (Rom. 12:1).

Discipleship is the process of helping people to live into that response of worship that glorifies and pleases God. We train people in the development of new habits and mindsets that facilitate the working of God's Spirit to transform us more fully into the image of Christ. (2 Cor. 3:18). Tangible acts of generosity with our time, talents and resources are among these new patterns that influence our hearts in a transformative way. Practices of generous living help us overcome our sinful nature's inclination to be selfish, creating idols of money and possessions, and spurs us on to acts of loving the world that God so loves. How we use our resources is such a good indicator of the love in our hearts that Jesus made a direct correlation between them, saying that "where our treasure is that's where our hearts will be" (Matt. 6:21).

This is why proper stewardship of the resources God has given us is essential to the Christian life. As Reformed Christians, we understand that God owns our world. As Abraham Kuiper once stated it, "there is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry: Mine!"¹ With the understanding that all our resources are His, we believe they should be used wisely and productively for the sake of His kingdom. By knowing who we are in Christ and surrendering our experiences and emotional charge around money, we can make a conscious decision with the Spirit's leading of what to do with the income we receive, in what order, and why; for the extent and degree to which God has called each of us to use our money is different for every person. But, above all, God calls us to serve Him and not money.

In the Old Testament, God instructed His people in a practice of "tithing" (giving the first 10% of their resources to God) to help them develop a heart that loves God first, above all else. Abraham was the first to tithe (Gen. 14:17-20). After receiving a blessing from the high priest, Melchizedek, he spontaneously gave him "a tenth of all he had". Similarly, the Israelites were instructed to give various tithes of their produce and present the best of their flocks for sacrifices at the temple. A lame sacrifice was not acceptable because it showed dishonor to God (Deut. 15:21, Mal. 1:8), while giving the first and best was an acceptable offering of worship. These gifts were used to support the priests and Levites, who had no inheritance because they were devoted to the service of God. The tithe also went towards the care of the poor within the community. It was a beautiful picture of the kind of covenant sharing that God desired--for all to be taken care of and for the work and worship of God to always be supported. It was such an important practice to God that during one period of time when the Israelites were not observing this practice, God rebuked them and told them to "bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house" (Malachi 3:10) and he promised them that if they were to do this, He would "rebuke the devourer" and "open the floodgates" of blessing upon all they own.

¹ *Abraham Kuiper: A Centennial Reader*, James D. Bratt, ed

In the New Testament, explicit instructions about tithing are replaced by exhortations towards even more expansive and life-encompassing practices of justice, mercy, faithfulness in stewardship (Matt. 23:23) and generous, sacrificial support for the ministry of the gospel (1 Cor. 16:2). Through the Spirit of God working in the hearts of believers comes overflowing generosity towards the poor and towards the work and worship of God. Some gave all they have to follow Jesus (Luke 5:11). Others give radical gifts to the Church and provide for the needs of God's missionaries (2 Cor. 8:2). Property is shared, the rich and poor are given equal dignity, as people with renewed hearts seek to live surrendered to Christ, putting His kingdom above their material pursuits (Acts 4:32). All of these accounts create a beautiful picture of God's justice and shalom that we as members of Christ's body in the world today also desire to live into.

As we seek to foster this heart of love and surrender to God through our discipleship at Alive, we encourage people towards the principles of stewardship, devotion and generosity that are revealed throughout Scripture. We encourage people to develop a rhythm of honoring God with their "first fruits", not out of obligation or a sense of earning points with God, but as a regular practice of gratitude and love for God and His people. If "tithing" (giving a percentage of your income "first") is engaged with that kind of heart, it becomes a healthy spiritual rhythm that is formative in developing a deeper trust in God and surrender to His lordship in our lives, and it moves us towards greater financial shalom (Prov. 3:9-10). However, we also recognize that when works-based thinking, pride or apathy from our sinful nature comes into play, tithing can become nothing but an empty legalistic ritual that actually limits our growth in love and generosity towards others (Luke 11:42). We acknowledge that "giving to God" means much more than just giving to the local church, and we encourage people to obey the Spirit's promptings to give to those in need and support the work of the Kingdom whenever opportunities arise. Those in need in our world also belong to God and He desires to provide for them through the generosity and care of His people (Prov. 19:17, Matt. 25:35, 1 John 3:17, Eph. 4:28, Heb. 13:16, Gal. 2:10).

Following the patterns we see in Scripture, we encourage the "first fruits" to be offered to the local church in order to fund the work of ministry in the community, to support the salaries of those who are called to teach and equip the Church, and to support the poor, widows and those in crisis within the congregation. This means that the local church has a weighty responsibility to use the resources that come in with great integrity, faithfulness and spiritual discernment so that money is not wasted, saved without good reason, or spent extravagantly or frivolously. Those in charge of financial stewardship in the church must carry out their responsibilities with transparency and honesty.