

Appendix B – Standards for Personal Giving

Scripture gives us at least four standards for personal giving. The first of these is “first fruits”. The Israelites are instructed to gather “the first of all the fruit of the ground, which you harvest from your land that the Lord your God gives you, and you shall put it in a basket, and you shall go to the place which the Lord your God will choose as a dwelling for his name” (Deuteronomy 26:1-11). Then the gift was to be laid before the altar and a prayer of thanksgiving was to be offered. First fruits seems to be consistently linked with the thank offering (see also Leviticus 23:10-14). Other Old Testament scripture references link the offering of first fruits with support for those who attend to the altar (Nehemiah 10:34-39) and with celebration at various religious festivals (Exodus 23:14-17).

The second of the personal standards is tithing. The first Biblical reference to tithing occurs as Abraham is returning to his land and offers “a tenth of everything” [that he has] to Melchizedek (Genesis 14:18-20). The next is Jacob vowing “of all that you give me I will surely give one-tenth to you” (Genesis 28:22). However, the strongest admonition to the tithe for the ancient Israelites is found in the giving of the law: “All tithes from the land, whether the seed from the ground or the fruit from the tree, are the Lord's; they are holy to the Lord... All tithes of herd and flock, every tenth one that passes under the shepherd's staff, shall be holy to the Lord” (Leviticus 27:30-32). In the next book of the Pentateuch we see the tithe directed to those who serve in the tent of meeting: “...because I have given to the Levites as their portion the tithe of the Israelites, which they set apart as an offering to the Lord. Therefore I have said of them that they shall have no allotment among the Israelites” (Numbers 18:21-24). The giving of the tithe for those who serve the house of the Lord is also contained in later Old Testament writings (Nehemiah 11:35-39; II Chronicles 31:4-6). In these later writings the expectation of a full tithe is also clearly stated: “Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you 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 tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing (Malachi 3:8-10). It is intriguing that the only words Jesus has to offer concerning tithing are derisive: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!” (Matthew 23:23-24). See also his story of the Pharisee and the Publican (Luke 18:12). From these examples, it appears that Jesus was not putting down the idea of the tithe -- rather, he found fault with those who *only* tithed. This is very consistent with Hebrew tradition that a tithe was but the beginning of giving, the place at which one was to start in returning from the riches one had received. Clearly Jesus had much bigger things in mind, such as faithfulness to the Law of Love and to justice and mercy. From the whole of his ministry and his words which have come down to us, it is also apparent that Jesus called each of his followers to give freely and completely of themselves and of their possessions (Ephesians 5:22, Romans 12:1).

The “Widow's Mite” is the third of the personal standards for giving. Jesus watched with his disciples as the multitude was putting money into the treasury. The rich people were putting in large sums of money while a poor widow put in only two copper coins (a penny or so). Yet Jesus commended her for putting in “everything she had, all she had to

live on.” while the rich “contributed out of their abundance” (Mark 12:41-44). Finally the fourth personal standard is the incident commonly known as the story of the “rich young ruler”. Jesus’ answer to the seemingly righteous young man who had faithfully obeyed the Law all his life was that he was still lacking in one area: “Sell all that you own and distribute the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me” (Luke 18:18-23). These third and fourth standards give an indication of the complete offering of one’s self that Christ seeks. They are also a standard to which *some* are called (i.e. those who are called to the vow of holy poverty). For those who are not called to such austere vows, they surely are a strong proclamation that we are to give more, rather than less; to recognize that indeed, “All things come of thee, O Lord...” and that it is from the abundance of God’s grace that we have received, and from that abundance we must return to God.

Scripture also provides a number of standards for corporate giving. Our corporate entity in this context is the local community; within the church the local community is the parish/congregation. We offer observations of corporate giving in three realms: outside the congregation, within the congregation, and between congregations. Although the “congregation” in ancient Israel was typically the local community, on occasion the relevant entity was one of the twelve tribes or was sometimes the entire body of the Israelites. In Deuteronomy 24:14-22 the Israelites were instructed to give special consideration to the poor, especially to resident aliens, orphans and widows. They were to pay wages when due and to render justice without discrimination. They were not to go back into the field a second time to gather what had been left behind, nor to beat the olive tree a second time, nor to gather the grapes twice; this was to ensure that the poor in the land would have sustenance. We see this played out in later days in the book of Ruth, where Ruth is one of those poor who is gleaning in the field of her relative-by-marriage, Boaz.