
THE POWER *BEHIND* GIVING AND TITHING

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One of the lessons we have to *keep* learning is that God's ways and thoughts are not like ours. Our natural tendencies incline us to act and to think opposite from how God does. That's why it's helpful to be reminded again and again about basic patterns for successful life in the kingdom of God. For instance, Jesus tells us, "...*The last shall be first*" (Matthew 20:16), and "...*Whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant*" (Matthew 20:26).

Instead of returning insults and blows to those who hurt us, the way we would naturally want to do, we are told to *bless* and turn the other cheek (Matthew 5:39). That seems crazy! *Serve others*, instead of getting them to serve you; *love people unconditionally*, instead of loving them with a set of expectations; *show mercy and be kind* to people who oppose you; *live your life in submission*, rather than in rebellion? Who ever heard of things so ridiculous?

That's the point, the lessons we have to keep learning.

Beneath each of these seemingly impossible and ridiculous admonitions is a power principle of the Kingdom—a truth about how things really work in the cosmos—how you and I can end up with the most abundant and satisfied lives. The whole point of living according to God's way is to bring bounty and good into our lives. The actions or attitudes that seem to place us at a disadvantage in the world are the very ones that give us the advantage in the Kingdom.

Money is one of the most obvious topics of disagreement between what God and our natural thoughts advise. The world-system tells us that the more wealth we can get and keep for ourselves, the more we will end up with at the end of the day. Most of our lives are lived under a relentless pressure that harries us with thoughts like, "*You do not have enough to take care of yourself; you certainly do not have enough to give away to others, not even to God!*"

The first part of that sentence is true, and always will be: we do not have enough to assure an abundant future. The Kingdom solution to that reality is, however, quite the opposite of the world's solution. The Lord urges us to do the very thing we feel like we cannot safely do: purposefully give what we have been given.

GOD'S INTENTION

That is why our decision about whether or not to put our trust in the advice of the Bible really boils down to a question of faith—what we believe about what God wants for us: “Do I believe that God wants to enrich my life with more than I can get by my own smarts or effort?”

God freely gave His Son on our behalf to eliminate our total debt (Romans 8:32; Colossians 2:13-14); He has done for us what we could not do for ourselves. So, it is completely inconsistent with all He has already done to question if He has switched tactics from *giving* to *grabbing*. Once that truth settles into our heart and we grasp the reality of God's determination to (actively) *do us good all the days of our life*, virtually every point of instruction in the Bible comes alive in a different light than we have seen it before.

God names Himself *Jehovah-Jireh*, *the Lord of Plenty*, *the God of Provision and Supply*. Since He places His identity so squarely on a particular activity done for the sake of His followers, we can have great confidence in His promise to *provide what we need to live a life of plenty*. But learning how to let Him do for us what we're so tempted to try to do for ourselves—well, that's another matter.

WHY IS MONEY SO BIG?

Jesus spoke a great deal about the spiritual power of money because He knew how BIG the subject is to us, and it is no accident that He uses the concept of “debt” to describe the condition we are in as a result of our sins. People who have been in major debt, and those of us who dread that possibility know what it does to ruin life. It's an effective analogy.

Normal living in a fallen world teaches us that we should do everything we can to get more money. In addition to that pressure, there are several other reasons why the subject of how to use our money is more sensitive than some other spiritual-life topics:

1. Money is a gigantic crossroads for almost every aspect of people's lives (fears and aspirations; success and failure; survival and protection; etc.), so the stakes seem higher and more life-threatening. Almost all of us need more of it, and we haven't figured out how we're going to survive with the little we have—much less, if we give some away.
2. Inappropriate appeals for money have checkered the church's history. We've seen enough nonsense on TV to jade our perspective. We rightly don't want our money to go to the wrong place, and it is hard to see how giving money to a human agency (church) is the same as giving it to God.

3. Money is very spiritual, and its roots go deep into people's heart. It's hard enough keeping track of it in our check register, so most people already feel a bit overwhelmed by it—even before God is introduced into the conversation.
4. Being very tangible, money leaves no doubt about where it gets spent, and that can make us feel as though we're caught "red-handed" with our hand in the wrong cookie jar.

MATTHEW 5 AND 6

- How to welcome (pray) God's rulership on Earth "Thy Kingdom come."
- Blessed are the seemingly disadvantaged.
- "...Your Father who sees in secret will repay you" (Matthew 6:18).
- Two Investment Choices (for Your Heart)—Two Value Judgments.

"No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth [mammon]."
~Matthew 6:24

TWO CATECHISMS

- Mammon's instruction leads to anxiety, and puts the greatest value on things.
- God's counsel leads to peace, and places ultimate value on you.

2 CORINTHIANS 9-10

- Paul's true apostolic authority—to build people up (2 Corinthians 10:8).
- Sowing and reaping—a basic law in the Kingdom of God.
- Grudging, 'forced giving' misses the heart of God—and thereby, the blessing.
- Cheerful giving creates an abundant supply from God.
- Two little-known harvests of righteousness—plenty and generosity.

THE GOLDEN RULE

The “Golden Rule” as it is commonly known, is not commonly understood in all of its spiritual implications. Jesus is not just giving you and me a moral code, a list of behavioral requirements that will allow us to prove we’re good enough to claim the title “Christian.” Rather, Jesus understands that His Father’s ultimate purpose is to redeem and restore us back to our original constitution (before sin ruined and disfigured us). Since we were made “in the image of God,” Jesus is helping us—with His words and miraculous, Spirit-powered enablements—to become increasingly like our Father in Heaven.

“Treat others the same way you want them to treat you. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you love those who love you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners love those who love them. If you do good to those who do good to you, what credit is that to you? For even sinners do the same. If you lend to those from whom you expect to receive, what credit is that to you? Even sinners lend to sinners in order to receive back the same amount. But love your enemies, and do good, and lend, expecting nothing in return; and your reward will be great, and you will be sons of the Most High; for He Himself is kind to ungrateful and evil men. Be merciful, just as your Father is merciful.

Do not judge, and you will not be judged; and do not condemn, and you will not be condemned; pardon, and you will be pardoned. Give, and it will be given to you. They will pour into your lap a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, running over, and running over. For by your standard of measure it will be measured to you in return.” ~Luke 6:31-38

FUTURE RETURNS

The “Golden Rule” is one of the spiritual laws that govern the invisible dimension of the universe (remember the laws of thermodynamics from Physics class?), and it actually has two principles correlating with the greatest commandments (love God and love your neighbor):

- Follow the example of God, and do unto others like the Lord does unto you—live like the Lord lives because it always leads to blessing.
- Do not let what others have done dictate your behavior; instead, do unto others like you want done unto you—you will reap what you (not others) sow in your life.

The best interpretation for everything Jesus says to us is to see it in light of the question, “*What do you want in/for your future?*” Just as the Lord led His people into the Promise Land (and they

would have arrived much earlier if they had done it His way from the beginning), so God wants to bring us to a place of well-being where our soul prospers on this broken planet.

Even though we'd like the opportunity to prove the adage ourselves, most of us do believe that money (alone) cannot buy happiness, and that a thriving, fulfilled, satisfied life is not spawned by stuff on our shelves or in the department stores. Jesus has come to give us that kind of "abundant life" (John 10:10).

Every strategist, financial planner, business entrepreneur, and parent understands that what we have NOW is not the same as what we'll end up with at the end of the day. That is the point of making an investment (*lit. putting money to use*)—we want a return—we want the golden boomerang to come back bigger and better off than when it was thrown out and away from us! Jesus is offering us the soundest and surest investment advice in the cosmos, and it's called the "Golden Rule" because of the plenty it returns in our future.

LUKE 16:1-16

Plan for your natural source of money to end (like retirement):

- Invest it shrewdly.
- Change it into something longer-lasting.
- Be faithful with what really counts (adds up).

BETTER THAN LUCK OR FORTUNE

A *blessed* life is neither *lucky* nor *fortunate*. Our culture uses those words interchangeably, but they are far from synonymous! They describe lives that have experienced a *more-than-normal* degree of advantage—extra bounty, more breaks—things inexplicably "going their way." We exclaim to such people (if we like them): "*Lucky you!*" or "*You are sooo fortunate!*" And if we don't care for them, or if we feel slighted that they got the break (instead of us), we mutter: "*Aren't you lucky?*" or "*Must be nice...some people have **all** the luck!*"

Something in or about their lives strikes us as unusually prosperous; it is flourishing beyond the norm, and only good *luck* or good *fortune* can explain the difference between what is happening in their lives and what is happening in others.' *Luck* and *fortune* is not for anyone and everyone—just the lucky few! Sure, hard work and perseverance are said to help someone get lucky, but lots of us work hard and never get lucky.

That's the point; their state of affairs is better off than ours because of something extra-ordinary, some non-material source that is not available or accessible through our natural abilities. If we knew how to get lucky or fortunate, we'd do whatever it took. The problem is that *luck* is a random, a coincidental product of chance, even though people try to associate it with the last thing they were doing or wearing when they "got lucky."

Fortune hints at a destiny, or life-course predetermined by the gods, the stars, or the quasi-deity, "*fortune*" herself, who "*smiles down on*" a select few.

People can't make themselves lucky—though they may try by blowing on dice, by wearing the same baseball cap, or by using combinations of personally meaningful numbers to second-guess the random lottery sequence.

People can't make themselves fortunate—though they may try by searching for auspicious omens among the stars; by performing various acts of supplication and invocation to gods, goddesses, ancestors, and unnamed powers; or, by trying to line themselves up with vague forces in the cosmos. But, you can't turn your fortune around—even by increasing your financial fortune. Bottom line, you either are lucky, or you're not.

BLESSINGS

That's why *blessing* is so different. It is neither a random occurrence (like *luck*), nor an outcome predetermined before we existed (like *fortune*). *Blessing* is a result, a consequence linked to something we have previously done. *Blessing* does not depend on being "in the right place at the right time" by chance, and neither does it happen if/when stars or cookies foretell it so. We can step into *blessing* anytime we choose. That's because *blessing* comes from God. And He has linked His *blessing* to particular ways of living.

For instance, the Bible spells out a very clear way in which children are to be raised—how to love, discipline, secure and advantage them—so that they prosper in life and we receive extra joy (as opposed to grief) from their lives. Parents of great kids aren't *lucky* or *fortunate*; they're *blessed* to have such children *as a result of raising them according to the pattern God blesses*. Likewise, we end up experiencing a life of *more than normal* peace, joy, and kindness (as opposed to enmity and jealousy), not because we're lucky or fortunate, but because we are *blessed* by having chosen to plant those spiritual seeds!

There are dozens of *pathways to blessing* outlined in Scripture. None of them make sense to the natural mind ("*If you want the blessing of leading, position yourself last and least of all.*"). But if we compare ridiculous sounding, biblical blessing-bringers ("*if you want to end up with more, give*

more away”), with superstitious notions like blowing on dice, picking lucky numbers, or trusting that the star patterns will give us a good child, the ways of God begin to sound like a far surer bet.

God’s patterns are not inaccessible or out of reach like those of the stars or fate or luck. His ways *are in all the earth* (Psalm 105:7); His ways always lead to greater good for us. **Pathways to blessing** are fairly easy to spot in the Bible, once we know what we’re looking for; promises of bounty that follow crazy-seeming, not naturally-occurring-to-us instructions, like:

Rely On God, Rather Than On Your Own Abilities (Proverbs 3:5-6)

- Take the path He indicates, even when you think yours seems better.
- By choosing to walk His way, you will end up walking straight [where it is smooth, pleasant and prosperous].

Trust God’s Call About That Which Is Evil (Proverbs 3:7-8)

- Though it might look like what you want/need to live, *evil* erodes well-being.
- Turn away from evil, and your whole being will become healthier, happier and revitalized.

Honor God’s Role As the Source of your Wealth (Proverbs 3:9-10; Deuteronomy 8:18)

- The first of all your produce belongs to God, and what we do with it makes a declaration about whose hand got you where you are.
- Give your tithe (first tenth) to the Lord, and He will accept the continued responsibility to keep you in plenty and abundance.

Pathways to Blessing Scriptures

- *“The generous man will be prosperous, and he who waters will himself be watered.”*
~Proverbs 11:25
- *“He who gives attention to the word will find good, and blessed is he who trusts in the Lord.”* ~Proverbs 16:20
- *“He who is generous will be blessed, for he gives some of his food to the poor.”* ~Proverbs 22:9

BLESSINGS OR CURSES

As a final puzzle piece to complete our biblical perspective of the power behind giving and tithing, we must further understand the spiritual concepts of blessings and curses. As we've learned already, a blessing brings a future state of well-being that (often) comes after a condition or circumstance or posture that seems disadvantageous to us. You and I can activate the power of blessing by the choices we make!

If we want the power of *blessing* to propel us into being a leader, for instance, we simply choose to place ourselves in the role of servant to all. If we want to prosper beyond what our natural abilities and life-circumstances afford us, we can simply choose to become generous and to give away more of the little we have.

Are there some people who manage to end up as leaders by sheer force of their will? Yes. Do some people's life-circumstances or skills enable them to be rich without the power of *blessing*? Absolutely. But that disconnect—having lots of money without any noticeable link to God—endangers them because they get fooled into relying on themselves, instead of God. When the riches are exhausted, or when people face a need that cannot be answered by money (i.e., relationships, eternity), they have no additional resource.

Most of us have no hope of becoming “well-off” on our own. Our “own-means” is inadequate. The *good news* is that we still have an option open to us. It's called *blessing*. Put in motion by someone with superior authority/resource to secure more benefit for people with less means (Hebrews 7:7), *blessings* add greater advantage or provision than people can get on their own.

Curses, on the other hand, do the opposite. *Curses* make everything harder. *Blessings* make things “come together” in the most extraordinary way; *curses* cause things to “fall apart” for no discernable reason. A *blessing* is like the sun: when it shines on us, we get warmed (and tanned). We can do things to get warm ourselves—wear thick socks and coats—but it is much easier and much more pleasant to bask in the sun. If we “live under a curse,” we have to work overtime and expend additional effort to get warm—and no matter how hard we work at overcoming the cold disadvantage we have been placed in by a *curse*, we find ourselves unable to quite get warm enough.

Both Blessings and Curses Are Spiritual Forces that Make Things Happen in the Future

A *blessing* is like a freshly cut Christmas tree in our living room. It delights our senses of sight and smell, and it makes us happier to be in the room. Conversely, a *curse* is like cat pee in our carpet, or mold growing in our walls—the stench permeates everything, and no amount of deodorant spray or carpet cleaning can quite eliminate the smell. We are not happy campers living in such an environment.

God has spelled out a very definite way, in the midst of this broken world, to secure extra advantage for us financially. He selected a particular pathway that leads to financial prosperity (greater-than-normal-amounts) in two capacities: it triggers a *blessing* and precludes a *curse*. This double-portion life-pattern is found in Malachi 3:8-11:

*“Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed Thee?’ In **tithes** (tenths) and **offerings** (presents, gifts).*

*‘You are **cursed** with a **curse**, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and **test** (investigate, examine, prove) Me now in this,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a **blessing** until it **overflows** (runs out of room).’*

*‘Then I will rebuke the **devourer** (consumer, eater) for you, so that it will not **destroy** (ruin, spoil, spill) the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,’ says the Lord of hosts.”*

SIMPLE QUESTIONS ABOUT TITHING

- What (how much) is the tithe? Is tithing the same as giving/offering? (Leviticus 27:30)
- What statement does the tithe make to the Lord?
- What consequences do giving the tithe lead to?
- Is tithing talked about in the New Testament, or is it exclusively part of the Old Testament Law? (Genesis 14:17-20; Luke 11:42; Hebrews 7:1-10)
- Where is the tithe to be given? For what purposes is the tithe used? (Numbers 18:21; Nehemiah 10:34-39; 13:10-12)

CONCLUSION

At one point in Jesus’ ministry, He was telling His followers about a rare privilege they had as His disciples. They got to know the *mystery* of the kingdom (Mark 4:11). That is not as mysterious as it sounds. It is like a PIN number for a debit card; the plastic doesn’t work without the authorized code. As believers, we receive our Kingdom debit card when we accept Jesus as Savior, and in a sense, we do not *need* any other spiritual event/privilege for the rest of our lives on Earth.

But, if we want to flourish in God's ways, and be dynamic instruments in His hands to change people's lives, we must remember the PIN codes. They aren't a set of digits; but understandings and reminders that His ways are not like our ways, and His thoughts are higher than ours (Isaiah 55:8-9). God has chosen to *bless* certain paths in the wilderness, and He will lead us in the way we should go...if we are willing (Isaiah 42:16).