

# The Gift of Giving

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I remember the day my wife and I stopped tithing. No, we hadn't departed from the faith, nor were we even rebelling against our upbringing (both of us grew up in pastors' homes and had been diligently taught to give God 10 percent).

We'd been married about three years when we realized tithing had become a duty. It was a bill to pay, along with the bills from the phone company, Shell Oil, and MasterCard. Every two weeks, you wrote out the checks and watched the dollars float away.

"Wait a minute!" we said. "This is no way to present a *gift*." We got to talking about what a joyous experience a birthday is, or Christmas, with boxes wrapped up in shiny paper and smiles all around. What's inside? The giver knows, but he won't tell. He waits for the climactic moment to present his generosity. Now *that's* giving.

How could we create a similar mood about our gifts to the Lord?

We decided to play a little word game with ourselves. No more tithing; from now on we would give as at Christmas-time. We were tired of giving "reluctantly or under compulsion"; we wanted to become cheerful givers (2 Cor. 9:7).

We began setting our offering envelope with the check inside on the kitchen table, along with the salt and pepper, where we could pray over it at Sunday morning breakfast. "Lord, we have something special to give You today, and we hope You like it. It's our way of saying we love You."

Did the dollar amount change under this new approach? No. We established 10 percent as a minimum, and in subse-

quent years we began bumping up the percentage as the Lord increased our earnings. (One of the small blessings of modern calculators is that they make incremental giving easy to compute.) We steadfastly refused to let ourselves ever begrudge this money.

I honestly believe God would rather have a joyous 5 percent than a reluctant 10 percent. And I *know* He'd much prefer steady, planned giving to hit-or-miss giving. He gives His many blessings to us steadily and consistently, and we can well afford to do the same.

In addition to giving with the proper attitude, here are some other guidelines:

1. *Give God His portion first.* That's the whole point: He is the source of "every good and perfect gift" (James 1:17). To leave Him till last, after the other bills are paid, is backward. If you had to trim your Christmas list, you wouldn't omit those dearest to you, would you? The same principle applies to giving to God.

2. *Make sure God endorses the destination of your gift.* While God's kingdom has many different offices, not everyone who hangs out the Christian shingle deserves God's money. You are responsible for getting those dollars into efforts that please Him.

3. *Let your children know what you're doing.* Don't hide the fact of your giving. While younger ones don't need to know actual amounts, let them see you actually presenting your gifts to the Lord—joyfully.

4. *Guide your children to do the same.* Money they give should come from their pockets, not yours. The exercise of proportionate giving can be started early (besides, it's a good math drill).

Any child old enough to spend is old enough to give.

5. *Don't look for "pay-backs."* Just as we all despise the relative who gives a birthday gift and keeps reminding us of it for the next three years, God doesn't appreciate manipulation. To say to God, "Well, here's my offering, and now You owe me one" only sours the relationship. People who, on the basis of tithing, look to God for health, next year's raise, or free trips are engaging in coercion, not love.

It is true that Scripture promises blessing to those who honor the Lord with their assets. "Give, and it will be giv-

en to you" is a biblical fact (Luke 6:38). But no one likes to be hounded to fulfill promises he's made. Most parents have faced the irritation of a pouty child whining, "But you *promised!*" It drains all the joy out of doing whatever nice thing the parent had originally intended. The same is true of our Heavenly Father.

To cite one final admonition from Jesus: "Freely you have received, freely give" (Matt. 10:8).