

Key Questions for Followers of Jesus

Can we put Christ first in all things, deny ourselves, take up our crosses and follow him (Matt. 10:38; Mark 8:34; Luke 14:27), with no noticeable effect on what we do with our money and possessions?

The obvious answer is “no, we can’t.” In the Bible, the Lord speaks more often and in more ways about money than any other subject. We are told, for example, “No man can serve two masters: for either he will hate the one, and love the other; or else he will hold to the one, and despise the other. You cannot serve God and mammon (money)” (Matt. 6:24). Also, “If therefore you have not been faithful in the unrighteous mammon, who will commit to your trust the true riches?” (Luke 16:11).

Those who would joyfully follow Jesus must steward their possessions and money in ways that please God and build His kingdom.

How much should I keep?

Most Christians ask a different question. They ask, “How much should I give?” The problem with that question is it tends to assume that what we have is ours and we’re sharing with God. Actually, everything we have belongs to God and we received it from Him (1 Cor. 4:7). So, the appropriate question is how much should I keep? How much is enough to meet my needs, needs God promised to meet? (Matt. 6:33)

Those who would joyfully follow Jesus should excel in the grace of giving. Here, it’s important to see the difference between most Christian’s ideas about how much is enough and the Bible’s ideas. Most Christians see a tithe (10%) of their income as a great sacrifice. They borrow the idea of a 10% tithe from the Old Testament (for example, Deut. 14:22-29). However, once you add up the various tithes and offerings commanded in the Old Testament, Israelites actually gave closer to 25-30% of their income. But the New Testament is more radical than even the tithing system of the Old

Testament. The New Testament teaches that God owns it all and we’re simply stewards managing His resources for a greater return for His glory (Matt. 25:14-30).

An Example and Some Principles to Follow

The local church is the instrument through which the Lord accomplishes His kingdom purposes in the world. Not surprisingly, then, we see early Christians setting aside on the first day of the week a sum of money for the work of the ministry (1 Cor. 16:2).

The Apostle Paul commended the Macedonian churches as an example to follow for their grace in giving.

1And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches. 2Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity. 3For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own, 4they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints. 5And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God’s will. 6So we urged Titus, since he had earlier made a beginning, to bring also to completion this act of grace on your part. 7But just as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us—see that you also excel in this grace of giving. (2 Cor. 8:1-7)

Determination

Every Christian should determine not to be rich fools disguised as disciples of the Lord Jesus (Luke 12). We should determine to store up treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves can not steal (6:19-20). Let all who follow Jesus determine to do so in the grace of joyous, generous, free, excellent giving in faith. And let us rejoice that we were counted worthy to do so!

The Bible offers several principles for following Jesus in the grace of giving. Those who follow Jesus should:

1. Give with joy. The Macedonian churches were filled with “overflowing joy” because of the grace of God, and that impacted their giving. A little later, that apostle writes that “God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). Why cheerful? Well, because giving is an act of worship directed toward a God who gave us His best in His Son and held nothing back.

2. Give generously. The church in Macedonia “gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability” (v. 3). Those who follow Jesus do not set arbitrary limits to their giving, the way some mistakenly apply the tithe. Rather they try to exceed every limit in their giving for the glory of God. “Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously” (2 Cor. 9:6). So, our giving should be generous according to our income (1 Cor. 16:12; 2 Cor. 8:12).

3. Give voluntarily. Throughout the Bible, the offerings and gifts that are accepted by God are those that are given freely from the heart, voluntarily, and not through guilt or coercion (Gen. 4:2-5; Prov. 11:24; 2 Cor. 9:7; Heb. 11:4). Jesus teaches that freely we have received, freely we are to give (Matt. 10:8). And notice that the Christians at Macedonia “urgently pleaded” for “the privilege of sharing.”

4. Give with excellence. Giving is a gift like other gifts from God (faith, speech, knowledge). In other words, giving can and should be cultivated and strengthened. As we follow the Lord Jesus, we should actually grow in the grace of giving. (2 Cor. 8:7)

5. Give with faith. Sometimes Christians feel incapable of giving as generously as they ought. They think the grace of radical, joyful giving is beyond their ability. In such cases, we must remember Who it is we are giving to. “God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work” (2 Cor. 9:8; see also Matt. 6:33). Others approach giving with some fear that income will be lost or needs unmet. But God promises “he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion...” (2 Cor. 10:11). In other words, give with complete confidence that God’s grace is sufficient for you and He will supply all your needs.

What today’s Christians consider “tithing”

10% of gross income

What OT Israel actually tithed:

25% of gross income

What NT Christians are called to give:

Everything