

Dear Pastor,

We know that as you teach this message about “acceptable gifts”, you will encounter some questions – personally, and in your congregation.

These questions may pertain to matters like tithing and church giving. As you know by now, the “acceptable gift” message can put the message of tithing into a biblical context that helps a church come together on the subject. Still, there is room for church leadership to explain more about “how we do it (giving) here.”

Since all churches are different, the outline below is provided as a starting point to help you develop your own messaging points for clearly communicating giving based on your unique giving culture.

Every church has a “giving culture”. It may be a culture of clear, frequent teaching, where questions addressed regularly. Or it may be a culture shaped by history where people just “know” what’s expected.

A vibrant culture is shaped by strong awareness and unity in clear beliefs. A weak culture is often shaped by silence on the subject, which can lead to confusion. Churches can say nothing about giving and still have traces of a giving culture just by the practice of taking up weekly collections – and how that is done.

It helps to look at what I call the three P’s in your church:

- (1) Philosophy – unified giving beliefs and doctrines held by leadership
- (2) Pulpit Language – ways the church communicates their giving *Philosophy*
- (3) Practices – methods to engage people in living out their giving *Philosophy*

When the three P’s exist in strong measure, a strong giving culture is likely. When they are not strong, a giving culture is often a weak one.

Please feel free to contact us, as I would love to help you walk out your sermon series, and the “three P’s” of your church’s giving culture.

With the biblical truths presented in these materials, our shared hope is that people in your congregation have a new perspective on their gifts.

Jeff Anderson
Acceptable Gift

Note to Pastors: Select Sermon Material You Can Customize for a “Wrap Up” Gifts Message

Some of these sections/questions can be integrated into your sermon outline. Others may simply be helpful topics for your own benefit as pastor.

Can tithing be an “acceptable gift”?

As we've seen from scripture – God's perspective on any gift centers on the four principles we've outlined. Questions concerning the tithe, and other “how much should I give?” questions, can be addressed through these principles.

Should I tithe 10% of my income?

- *Is the 10% tithe an amount that matters to you?*
 - *Is this a costly gift? or a cheap gift?*
 - *Is the tithe an amount that engages your heart?*
- *Is it a gift you have determined in your heart to give?*
- *Is the tithe a fair reflection of your giving ability? Or is your ability much greater? (consider various financial abilities, faith ability, blessings, relationship with God, etc.)*
- *Is your heart condition acceptable to God?*

Should I give 10% of my gross or net income? (or shall I give 15%, 20%...)

- *This is a common question – and a good one. The amount of our gift should matter to us and God is pleased when we wrestle with this healthy tension.*
- *Ultimately it is your decision to make. (You determine the amount.)*
- *Do you have the ability to give off the gross income? If so, then why not give off the gross?*
- *As always, God is most interested in your heart being acceptable to God.*

I received an inheritance from a family member. How much shall I give from this?

- *Another good question. God is pleased when we acknowledge Him with all our provision and come to Him with these questions. God wants our gift to matter to us, first.*
- *Again, this is a decision He wants you to make. (You determine the amount.)*
- *How has the inheritance impacted your ability to give?*
- *As always, make sure your heart is acceptable to God.*

Why isn't the tithe more clear?

The issue of the tithe is not biblically clear to everyone because it was never intended to be a universal biblical giving standard. The tithe has its place in biblical history as a component of a broader giving standard – the acceptable gift standard. Likewise today, the tithe remains a helpful tool for Christian to apply acceptable giving. But God desires for us to engage in giving through relationship with Him, not through a specific standard. (See www.acceptablegift.org for more research on the biblical tithe.)

If the doctrine of tithing is not a clear biblical giving standard today, what does this say about giving standards?

The matter of setting personal giving standard is biblical. Personal giving standards are helpful tools allowing us to give an amount that matters to our hearts and overall finances. As Paul instructed below, we should give regularly and systematically:

Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made. 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 (NIV)

Aside from its theological challenges, tithing remains a solid practice for churches and believers alike. The practice of tithing helps people to give systematically early in the giving journey. Many givers have a testimony to share of the role of tithing early in the Christian journey.

The practice of 10% tithing should not be discounted just because of its theological challenges. In the same way, the practice of tithing should not be held as a biblical standard today just because of its tradition and popularity. To do so would make it the only such performance standard or benchmark for the Christian faith today.

If tithing lacks doctrinal clarity, doesn't this threaten funding for the church?

The responsibility to support the local church, as revealed in the New Testament, is not a tithe-centered doctrine. The biblical case for church giving today stands separate from the doctrine of tithing. Two key reasons are given for why should support the affairs of the church.

We Must Support Preachers, Teachers and Church Workers

1 Timothy 5:17-18: *The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For scripture says, "do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain," and the worker deserves his wages".*

Paul references the Law of Moses (Deut 25:4 – “do not muzzle the ox”) in stating his case for supporting Christian workers. In doing so, he gave special mention to those who preach and teach for a living. In addition to supporting preachers and teachers, we are to support "the elders who direct the affairs of the church." In today's context, this safely implies support for administrative and other pastoral staff employed for the purpose of directing and carrying out local church operations.

1 Corinthians 9:13-14: *Don't you know that those who serve in the temple get their food from the temple, and that those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? The Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*

Once again, Paul draws on Old Testament principles to emphasize the need to support instructors who receive their living from the gospel. He does not bother to explain away tithe concerns or debate issues such as “what is the local church?” Instead he makes a strong statement about the connection between the workers of the temple and the workers of the contemporary church: church workers are entitled to our support.

We Must Share Materially Where We Have Been Blessed Spiritually:

1 Corinthians 9:9-11: *For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because whoever plows and threshes should be able to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest. **If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?***

Galatians 6:6: *the one who receives instruction in the word should share all good things with their instructor. (Gal 6:6);*

The ox is a popular character in Paul's teaching. (Note: opportunity for some self-directed humor here.) For a second time, Paul uses the hard-working beast to make the point that we must feed materially those who feed us spiritually. It is a simple principle. Don't starve the hand that feeds you. The principle applies in business. And it applies in our homes. And yes, it applies to our spiritual nourishment as well. If we consume, we must feed the system that feeds us.

Two Groups Who Need Our Gifts

The New Testament speaks of two groups that should not be neglected in our giving:

(1) The seed sowers. These are the instructors, teachers, preachers and missionaries of the word. This may involve direct support to individuals or to church and even parachurch organizations. (see section above)

(2) The needy - includes the poor, orphans, widows, distressed, etc. This certainly includes individuals who need our direct support but also includes organizations who are uniquely positioned and equipped to meet these needs on a large scale (the church and the parachurch).

It is implied in our status as Christ followers that we will support the needy. When the crowd asked John the Baptist how to bear the fruit of repentance, John's response was simple – *Anyone who has two shirts should share with the one who has none, and anyone who has food should do the same* (Luke 3:11).

Even for those who have only a change of clothes or enough food for two, there is a biblical responsibility to share with others. Compassion and support for the poor is well documented in the Old Testament law, the Psalms and Proverbs and of course, in the New Testament. It's a mega-theme throughout scriptures. Support and care for the needy represents a fundamental condition for knowing and loving God (1 John 3:16-17).

Emphasis on supporting the needy should not undermine our responsibility to support the "seed sowers. Nor should a "church first" giving philosophy suggest overlooking our broader obligation to the needy. We have a biblical responsibility to both. Even if the local church supports the needy through their budget, scriptures suggest we have a responsibility to engage directly and personally in the lives of the needy.

(Note: this is an excellent time to highlight how your church helps missions and the needy)

Parachurch vs Local Church

There's considerable discussion over whether church giving should have priority over para-church giving. Again, when tied to the doctrine of tithing, the case for "church-first" giving begins to break down depending on how people view the tithe. However, apart from the doctrine of tithing, we have learned already that we are to give materially where we are fed spiritually. And since we are encouraged to not neglect

regular assembly with fellow believers (Heb 10:25), it reasons that each of us should be a part of and a supporter of a local church community.

If we gather at our local church for weekly teaching and worship, take our children to Sunday school, entrust our teenagers for discipleship, seek fellowship with others in small groups, receive counseling and care from pastoral staff, etc., then we are benefitting from the local church. If we value our affiliation with the local church for spiritual belonging and connectedness, we should share our material harvest in return.

So what about the parachurch? If we are fed spiritually by these groups as well, then we have the privilege of sharing materially with them, too. But instead of figuring out how to divide 10% of their income over various seed sowers, perhaps we should be seeking ways to structure a lifestyle that allows us to 15, 25, 50 % or more of our incomes across a broader spectrum of seed-sowers that pour into our lives.

It is helpful when church leadership offers guidance for congregants to follow. If a church asks its members to tithe 10% to the local church as a way to help fulfill its mission and vision, this carries greater weight than asking them to tithe because the Bible says so. The former request is a membership request – no different than the request that everyone be part of a volunteer ministry. The latter is stated as a biblical command, which as we have discussed is not clearly biblical and accepted by everyone. A request of membership for financial commitment is an acceptable way to engage people in supporting the church financially.

Is it acceptable for churches to actively fund-raise for operating budget and special projects?

Absolutely! Perhaps the most compelling case for supporting the church might be this passage directed not at churchgoers – but to church workers. Church workers bear the responsibility for funding the church by engaging people to give.

“Do not get any gold or silver or copper to take with you in your belts— no bag for the journey or extra shirt or sandals or a staff, for the worker is worth his keep. Whatever town or village you enter, search there for some worthy person and stay at their house until you leave. Matthew 10:9-11

Jesus instructs the disciples to seek support for their ministry services. In fact, He discourages them from supporting themselves and denying support from others. Like Paul, Jesus taught that even before the early church movement that the worker is entitled to material provision in exchange for their ministry provision.

Churches have a biblical right and responsibility to engage congregants in support for the church. Church funding should not be a passive activity, but an active one.

What does church funding look like today? (for church leadership discussion purposes)

As mentioned previously, all churches have a giving culture. It may be a strong culture, or a weak one. Following are funding methods that help shape a church giving culture:

Default Funding – at a minimum, most all churches rely to some degree on default funding customs – this is giving that can be expected simply because they are a church and have some default mechanism for collecting tithes and offerings (“passing the plate”, collection boxes, etc). Churches can say very little, and even nothing, about church giving and still fund operations to some degree with defaults in place. To facilitate default giving, more churches today are going setting up electronic giving, automated giving, etc. to stay relevant with the times and expand the sources for default funding.

Vision Funding – More and more, churches are relying on demonstrated leadership and vision casting to fund church mission and initiatives. This is certainly biblical and effective. Vision-funding seems to favor larger churches with larger budgets and developed leadership bases (both staff and congregational) to craft, cast, execute and report on church vision.

Doctrinal Funding – Biblical preaching and teaching about giving is perhaps the most powerful tool for funding, but often the most ignored. Its potential is great because of its anointed source – God’s word. But it is often ignored because of the doctrinal uncertainty and confusion. The “acceptable gift” message is helping churches to strengthen its doctrinal giving position in a way that unites leadership and membership together. As a result, the people are strengthened spiritually and the church is strengthened financially.

Funding Practices – These are the systems and processes for helping people to engage in giving through default, vision and doctrinal funding strategies. This includes:

- Alternative default mechanisms for collecting tithes and offerings (online, automated, etc.)
- Donor recordkeeping and communications (thank you’s, account statements, other “touches”, etc)
- Vision reports, celebrations, etc. -

- Financial education classes – helping congregants handle money biblically so they can experience financial freedom and margin to factor meaningful giving in their financial lifestyles
- Commitments, pledges, membership covenants, etc. – ways for congregants to express giving intentions; helps church plan operating or project funding and offers accountability for givers

Our church: How we practice giving here (at First Church USA):

(Note: In this section you can address church-specific guidelines. This is your chance to share with your congregants whatever you wish to strengthen your giving culture as described above:

- Some churches do annual stewardship campaign for budget.
- Some take up offerings. Some use boxes.
- How our church is giving to our community and the world
- Expectations in our church family
- Discuss electronic giving in light of the “acceptable gift”
- Discuss automatically recurring gifts
- How gifts relate to our vision as a church
- Budget giving vs. project giving
- Giving commitments as part of membership? Or open-ended

Highlight:

- Gifts to the needy
- Ongoing outreach programs
- Church budgets and financial commitments
- Areas finances support (missions, children, youth, etc.)

Let's stay focused on the “acceptable gift”

- Our giving is important from God's perspective. Our gifts matter to Him.
- When we give to God, **the amount matters**
- **We determine the amount** of the gift.
- God measures our gifts **according to our abilities**.
- The condition of the **heart** makes the gift acceptable.
- When I write a check, open my wallet or purse, click a mouse to give – I can know that God can be delighted with my gift

See more resources at GenerousChurch.com and AcceptableGift.org