



## Straight Talk with Orthodox on “Tithes and Offerings”

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For over a dozen years now, I have been truly amazed at what I have heard other Orthodox saying and writing about the topic of “giving” and particularly about “giving to the Church.” To hear many of them tell it, there simply is no straight-forward, well-defined standard for Orthodox Christian giving to guide the actual behavior (“praxis”) of members of the Church. This alleged truth apparently leaves each of us free to deal with God “One-on-one” with everyone not a party to that discrete conversation left with little to say. This individualistic approach surely is familiar to us all as the Protestant approach to theology and to biblical interpretation in particular.

### **Is a Spiritual Motive More Important than the Method or Result of Giving?**

Much of what is cited among Orthodox from Holy Tradition on “giving” concerns motive, not method nor result.

**Motive.** Motive is crucial, no doubt. God loves us making it possible for us to love God. God gives to us as part of his expression of love for us making it possible for us to give in love to God and to godly efforts to spread Christ’s Kingdom and help others in His Name in this world. We must not give for the purpose of personal glory or community praise. All this is true and needs saying, but note it is also about motive not method.

Almost nothing is cited from Holy Tradition in contemporary Orthodox discussions on the results of giving. The results which are so often referenced among us when the Fall/Winter pledge-and-budget time rolls

around are typically of the sort such as this: “If we give, we can feed Father and his family, we can pay the electricity bill, and perhaps we can even rebuild the leaking roof.” These are all noble results of giving, necessary to the continuance of the parish and her ministries, but note that none of them typically begin, end or are justified in terms of Holy Tradition as is the case with the “motives”. Such hoped-for local “results” are really attempts to influence the outcome of our “private talks with God about how much I should pledge.”

Our Lord Jesus Christ in no way placed giving beyond our spiritual disciplines. He sequenced giving ahead of our praying and our fasting in His recital of disciplines of the Kingdom in *Matthew* 6. It is not Christ, but we ourselves who see giving as “un-spiritual!” But even if giving is a spiritual discipline—and it surely is to Christ Jesus—and not merely a secular virtue explainable on rational grounds indistinguishable from similar pleas to support our local neighborhood associations lest the neighborhood gardens go untended, are there any results of giving which are God-promised?

**Results.** Of course there are! *Matthew* 25: 31-46 is one of the most clear statements by our Lord Christ about His coming Judgment of us. And what will be the criteria for the separation of us into two groups: (1) the sheep to the right headed for the Kingdom and eternal life and (2) the goats to the left headed for everlasting punishment? The answer is, interestingly, “giving” in several forms and particularly giving to the benefit of the “least of these My brethren!” Holy

Tradition is full of clear, results to us of our giving with the right motives! Being blessed by God by giving as God says give is simply a fact of life. As such there is nothing improper about us sharing godly results of godly giving as encouragement to each other to give as God directs.

But, still, is there any guidance at all in Holy Tradition on the question of appropriate, godly method of giving? Indeed, there is, and this is exactly the point at which we Orthodox must reform our practices, our statements and our coffee hour chattering to conform more closely with Holy Tradition!

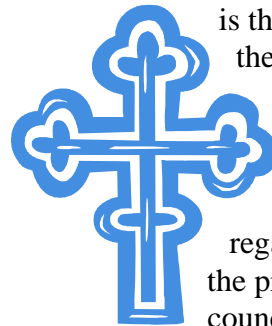
**Method.** For four thousand years the people of God have had the standard of tithes and offerings. Let's be brave and admit that is the case. Beginning with Father Abraham (*Genesis* 14: 18-20, about 2000 BC) and continuing to our own time there actually is a standard for our giving behavior which is quite objective. There are dozens of passages in Holy Scripture which are unambiguous on this point. Here are just two:

I, the Lord, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes, and have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts. "But you say, "How shall we return?" "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and offerings. 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 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 there is no more need. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the Lord of hosts. And all the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts (*Malachi* 3: 6-12).

(Underlining added). The Book of *Malachi* dates from about 432 B.C..

Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice, and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done without leaving the others undone" (*Matthew* 23: 23).



The "storehouse" of the people of God today is the parish. My tithe is due to the storehouse, and I owe my tithe to the "general operating fund" of my parish. I owe that to God, and I owe that to God regardless of whether: (a) I like the priest; (b) I think the parish council has its collective head in the sand; or (c) I'm tickled by the views of the bishop on international affairs. My tithe is 10% of absolutely everything God gives me by way of income or increase in my wealth over a period of time, usually a year. By the way, did you note the very clear results in the *Malachi* passage? This is an explicit promise of God to us!

Let's get real, brothers and sisters in Christ. The median income of a household in the USA for the most recent year for which figures are available is \$40,000. A tithe of

such a household's \$40,000 is \$4,000 given to the parish general fund. If my household happens to be exactly at the median for the USA, we should give as a tithe to God \$4,000 during the year.

### **Did the Tithe Last Beyond Biblical Times?**

Perhaps there are some among us who wonder if the "tithe" continued beyond biblical times into the times of the Holy Fathers. Good question and the answer is a loud and clear, "Yes!" Conciliar Press (Orthodox) has a topical booklet called "Tithing" by Fr. Ballew from which the following two examples are drawn:

In the 2d century AD, Saint Irenaeus wrote that Christ was referring to the tithe when He said to the Twelve: "To His Disciples, who had the Lord's Levitical substance (i.e. the tithe), He said, 'The workman is worthy of his food' (*Matthew*10:10) Then Irenaeus went on to refute those who said "the law of liberty" in Christ" freed them from giving a tithe to the Church: "And the class of oblations in general has not been set aside; for there were both oblations among the Jews and oblations in the Church, but what is changed is those who offer, for the offering is now made not by slaves, but by free people. (*Against Heresies*, Book IV, Chapter XVII, 2-3).

After discussing the requirements of God and especially of the Jews in the Old Testament, Saint John Chrysostom (4th century AD) makes this comment on *Ephesians* 2:10:

For what did not they of old do?  
They gave tithes, and tithes again

upon tithes for orphans, widows, and strangers; whereas some one was saying to me in astonishment of another person, 'Why, such a one gives tithes!' What a load of disgrace does this imply, since what was not a matter of wonder with the Jews has come to be so in the case of the Christians? If there was danger then in omitting tithes, think how great it must be now!" (*Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, volume XIII, First Series, page 69).

By the way, you may need some encouragement if you are beginning to believe that tithing is God's will for you, but are "scared to (financial) death!" Many people strive to tithe over several years, moving toward the tithe with God's help: this year 2%; next year 4%; next 6%; next 8% and, in the fifth year, 10% -- God's tithe is reached! As you move toward the tithe as God's will—and after you arrive—you will "catch on" that God's promise of blessings is true for you and your household. I've never known a former tither.

## What is the Difference Between Tithes and Offerings?

One of the greatest “offerings” stories ever told was by told by Jesus based on an actual offering He observed:

And Jesus looked up and saw the rich putting their gifts into the treasury, and He saw a certain poor widow putting in two small copper coins and He said, “Truly I say to you, this poor widow put in more than all of them; for they all out of their surplus put into the offering; but she out of her poverty put in all that she had to live on.” *Luke 21: 1-4*

(Underlining added.) This offering was really 100% for the widow!



Thus, there’s much more to the story of Orthodox giving than “tithes.” Offerings are our gifts to God—and to godly needs—without necessarily any reference to proportion.

TITHES	OFFERINGS
Proportional to income; based on a simple calculation of moving the decimal point one place to the left on our income and drawing a check	Not proportional; offerings are variable and depend upon the needs God shows us and the resources he has given us.
Goes to the parish general operating fund, the “storehouse,” for community needs	Goes to specific needs inside or outside the parish.

Throughout the Antiochian Archdiocese each year an opportunity is given us all on three separate Sundays to support Seminary Education generally, the Antiochian Patriarchate and Seminarians individually. There are many more Orthodox needs in and beyond our parishes such as International Orthodox Christian Charities and the Orthodox Christian Mission Center. These offering opportunities are the places for prayer and discernment of what we believe God wishes us to give.

## The Concept of Giving, in Summary

When we began, the promise contained in the title was “Straight Talk with Orthodox on ‘Tithes and Offerings’” and we will end on that minimalist and “straight from the shoulder” theme.

1. **Standard for Giving.** There really is a clear Orthodox standard for giving for individuals within the Church, the Body of Christ, and that standard is now and has been for four thousand years. *Malachi*, in the quote above, says the people have robbed God of “tithes and offerings”—God expects us to give both tithes and offerings.
2. **Tithing.** The tithe is 10% of our income or increase over a given time period, generally the year, which is easy to calculate by taking our income and moving the decimal point one place to the left. (Example: a tithe of \$1,000. is \$100.) If you wonder what your annual tithe is and if you pay Federal Income Taxes just look at your most recent 1040 form, take the number on the very bottom line of page one, and move the decimal point one place to the left. That’s your tithe. If your income

shrinks, note that your tithe automatically shrinks also. God knows what He is giving you! The tithe goes to the “storehouse”, the parish. The parish supports the diocese and other needs.

3. **Offering.** Offerings are our individual response to the opportunities for giving that God places before us. Offerings are non-proportional, personal, related to the need involved and to our individual resources.
4. **Tradition.** The giving of “tithes and offerings” does have proper motive, proper method, and proper results all of which all are grounded in Holy Tradition.

While we are “not slaves but free people,” we do have a clear, God-given standard for giving in His precepts of “tithes and offerings.” As free people, we do have a choice—as with prayer and fasting, we may choose to obey, or not obey

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