

The gift of giving

TITHING: AN EXERCISE OF THE HEART

How's your heart? If we want to keep healthy physically we have to look after our heart don't we? If you were to go to the doctor and they told you to change your lifestyle to keep your heart healthy What would you do? How's your heart?

Let me ask you another question. How's your heart? Biblically, the heart is the centre of a person – who they really are. How's your heart? What would you do if, in the light of eternity, you realised that you need to make some changes to your way of living to keep your heart healthy?

If I told you that there was a four letter word that did immense damage to your heart – what do you think that word might be? I suggest that it could be the word – MORE!!

This is one of the most powerful words in the English language. Remember J.D. Rockefeller – one of the richest men on the planet, he was asked “How much is enough” his reply was “Just a little bit more than I've got!” Just a little..... More!

Some very clever people spend their working life trying to convince people like you and me, that we need just a little more. They spend their working life trying to think up ways to convince us that what we have isn't quite enough; they spend their working life trying to convince us that we will be healthier if we buy what they are trying to sell! True satisfaction, they tell us, comes from having more.

We are bombarded by the prophets of more: use me, buy me, drive me, wear me, try me, and put me in your hair. I did a little survey of how many products there are for putting in our hair! You can wash it; blow dry it; condition it; colour it; straighten it; curl it; shave it; cut it; style it; grow it if you haven't got it and wax it if you have! How many of us – honestly – are truly satisfied with the way our

hair is? Surely just a little more of one product or another is what we really need.... isn't it?

More can become an insatiable desire – and it's not limited to hair products is it? Serving "more" will never satisfy us – and it won't result in a healthy heart. Jesus said "No-one can serve two masters; either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot be a slave to both God and money" (Mathew 6 v 24) Jesus didn't say this to be mean – or even to be judgemental, he was simply telling the truth – it doesn't work! There's not room in a human heart for two masters.

How's your heart? I'm not sure anyone sets out to be greedy – but it happens doesn't it? Jesus was very aware of the damage it can do to the heart! Remember Zacchaeus? His heart was motivated by an insatiable desire for more which became greed. When Jesus reached out to him with risky love his heart became a changed heart. Clenched grabbing hands became open hands; a greedy heart became a generous heart.

The way to a generous heart, and the way of transformation - was to give! We read nothing in the story of Zacchaeus to suggest that he achieved a transformation of his heart by willpower, we read nothing in the story of Zacchaeus to suggest that the knowledge that he was loved by God brought about a changed heart. What we read in this story is that he needed a tangible way to conquer his insatiable desire for more, and what he needed to do was give.

Friends, we need a tangible way to say "Sorry money you are not on the throne of my heart. You will not be the God of my life today." Now God in his grace has given us the best way to do this – it's called giving! Some people, with very good reason like to call it tithing.

I'm going to begin with the idea of tithing, but I'm going to move beyond it. What do you think of when you hear the word tithing? Maybe – an obligation; failure; irritation; fundraising; an impossibility! The concept of tithing comes from the Old Testament. "A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain or soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord". It literally means 'a tenth part' and was a

practice the people of Israel were actually supposed to do! In truth they had three tithes: one for the Levites; one for a feast; and one for the poor! If you add up the cost of those three it comes to 23% of their income – and that’s the minimum cost!

Closely associated with the idea of tithing was the concept of first fruits “Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops!” (Prov. 3 v 9). First fruits was more about a spiritual principle than tithing was – although they worked together. The principle was simply this – God is the real giver – he has blessed us and we want to honour him by giving the first and the best of what we have received. Another way of expressing it might be this – God deserves better than the leftovers! This principle is one of the most powerful spiritual practices that we can follow, it builds deeply and profoundly into the rhythm of our lives.

One writer writes - Every time I tithe, I remind myself that God is on the throne. Not me. Not money. Every time I tithe I reinforce that all I have is from him. The tithe is not a tip for good service, as though God were some helper I could patronise. He is the owner, I am the steward. Every time I tithe I make a declaration: ‘I will trust in God’ even when trusting doesn’t feel easy or natural. Every time I tithe I am reminded, even as I calculate how much, or how much I’ve been given - I count my blessings and in doing so, I put to death (or at least injure) the insatiable desire for more.

Now, friends, there is, whether we like it, or admit it or not, an unmistakable connection in Scripture between giving and spiritual life. So.... How’s your heart? When their hearts were turned towards God, they gave generously, when their hearts were turned away from God, they withheld, and when they withheld, their hearts turned away from God. When they gave generously, their hearts turned towards God. Friends, there is only one occasion in the bible where the people were actively encouraged to test God.

Malachi 3 v 6-12

“I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees

and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, “How are we to return?” Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask; “How do we rob you?” I say “In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the Lord Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

Their hearts had turned away, but God does not threaten them with some kind of punishment! He offers them a test, he says – give and see what happens! MMMM Some people argue that because tithing is an Old Testament concept we don’t need to be bothered with it today, but Jesus said he didn’t come to abolish the law, but to fulfil it. I think some of what God instituted in the Old Testament was really only meant to be a place to begin.

Moses said: “An eye for an eye” Jesus said: “Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” Here’s what I think is happening! Moses command was a place to begin in an extraordinarily violent society! The punishment must at least match the crime! Jesus takes it to where it was always meant to be! Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you. Seems to me that is far more demanding than an eye for an eye.

Perhaps the tithe was a place to begin: in order that you don’t get obsessed with wanting more – give some away! Jesus wants us to cultivate a generous heart that reflects the Father. Randy Alcorn writes: “The tithe was not a ceiling, it was merely a floor.” Friends – here’s my problem with tithing, it is, in truth a regressive tax, it costs the poor far more than it costs the rich. Tithing is, of course, still very good news for those of us who are rich, and some of us are…… aren’t we! Tithing is still bad news for those who are poor! When Jesus stood up in the temple and read from Isaiah: “The spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor.” The people listening would

have understood it in the context of the Old Testament principle of Jubilee. Jubilee was a sharing of economic wealth to be practised every 50 years. The point of it was to stop a gap existing and growing between rich and poor. It was never practised..... I wonder why? My best guess..... because it cost the rich far more than they were willing to give. See the problem is that the more we have, the more we want and the harder we find it to be generous!

How's your heart? The truth is that when hearts are turned towards God, they become generous hearts, that is exactly what happened in the early church.

Acts 2 v 42-47

They devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and to the fellowship, to the breaking of bread and to prayer. Everyone was filled with awe, and many wonders and miraculous signs were done by the apostles. All the believers were together and had everything in common. Selling their possessions and goods, they gave to anyone as he had need. Every day they continued to meet together in the temple courts. They broke bread in their homes and ate together with glad and sincere hearts, praising God and enjoying the favour of all the people. And the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.

How's your heart? We have a Koinoinia fund as one way of working this out: when you have a little more you give, when you have a little less others give to you! How's your heart? To those of you who genuinely are thinking – I simply can't afford to give, God's challenge is this, "Test me in this.... and see what I can do." To those of us with plenty, perhaps the challenge is this: where are you storing your treasure?

Friends, for all of us, giving is an exercise of the heart. So.... How's your heart.

Preached in Crawley Baptist Church by Rev. Ian Phillips on Sunday 22nd March 2009

