

“By a Single Offering...”

Hebrews 10:11-14, 19-25

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For a number of weeks now we have been hearing some beautiful passages from the epistle to the Hebrews. This epistle is the primary book in the New Testament where we learn about the *sacrifice* of Jesus Christ, of Christ’s role both as the great High Priest and as the sacrificial lamb, offered for the forgiveness of our sins. The theology in the book is rooted in the complex system of sacrifices in ancient Judaism that is prescribed in the Old Testament. It is a magnificent book, exploring an aspect of Christ’s life and work that we don’t talk about very much. Today let’s take a quick look at that sacrifice of Jesus.

In chapter 10 we read: “Every priest stands day after day at his service, offering again and again the same sacrifices that can never take away sins.” The writer is talking about the animal sacrifices that took place every day in the grand temple in Jerusalem. At the time of Jesus, there was *one* temple, and *many* synagogues. Synagogues were places of learning and prayer – faithful Jews would together to hear readings from the sacred scriptures, and pray, and sing. Our worship services today are very similar to those ancient Jewish services. There were synagogues all over the place – every Jewish town in Palestine had one; every city in the Roman Empire that had a Jewish community had one too. But there was also a temple, a *single* temple, in the city of Jerusalem; a temple that Jesus visited numerous times throughout his life, a temple to which Jewish pilgrims flocked for the three annual festivals. We don’t have anything like the temple. In the temple, Jewish priests performed ritual acts of sacrifice day after day. A lamb was sacrificed every morning; another lamb was sacrificed every afternoon. Additional sacrifices were made on the Sabbath, on the first day of every month, and at every festival. Jews were expected to offer many other sacrifices, on certain occasions or for specific types of sin. There was a massive altar on which the animals would be offered. There was a constant smell of roasted meat, and a constant stream of smoke ascending. There were four different types of sacrifices – burnt offerings, sin offerings, guilt offerings, and peace offerings. Five different animals were sacrificed – oxen, sheep, goats, turtledoves, and pigeons. Some sacrifices were mandatory; others were voluntarily. The primary purpose of it all was to atone for sins, to restore a right relationship with God. Offering a sacrifice did not *remove* sin from a person’s life; it did not make it any less likely that a person would not commit the same sin again. This is why Hebrews says that all these sacrifices “can never take away sins.” They can *atone* for sins, they can restore a broken relationship with God, but they do not *remove* the tendency to sin from a person’s life. That was why the world needed the sacrifice that Jesus offered. Hebrews says “by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are sanctified.” That sacrifice atoned for *all* the sins of *every* Christian: Jew and Gentile, male and female, young and old, past, present, and future. That one sacrifice atoned for all of *our* sins, and made it possible for us to grow *beyond* our tendency to sin. Jesus’s sacrifice meant that none of us *ever* have to bring burnt offerings or sin offerings or guilt offerings or peace offerings of animal flesh to *any* temple, *anywhere*. Christ’s sacrifice took care of it all.

But: that does not mean that our lives are free from the need to make sacrifices. We are still called to bring offerings to God. But the offerings we give, the sacrifices we make, are of a different character. We no longer offer *animals*. Instead, we offer our *time*, our *talents*, and our *treasure*. It is that last gift – *treasure* – that I want to call to your attention today. God calls us to make *financial contributions* to the ongoing ministry of the Church of Jesus Christ. I'm talking about ... *money*.

Now I am sure that some of you do not need to hear this sermon. I am quite confident that some of you give *very generously* and *sacrificially* for the good of the church. But I suspect that there may be others who need to hear this message again, or perhaps hear it for the very first time.

The biblical principle, as I have explained periodically in the past, is the *tithe*. God asks us to give *ten percent* of what we earn back to the church. That may sound like a lot. It's really not. *Everything* we have comes to us as a gift and a blessing from God. That job you have that brings you an income – that's a *gift* and a *blessing* from God. That income on your investments – that's a *gift* and a *blessing* from God. That Social Security income – that's a *gift* and a *blessing* from God. Those generous gifts you receive from time to time – those are *gifts* and *blessings* from God. Your entire financial well-being is a *gift* and a *blessing* from God. One hundred percent of your entire net worth has come from *God!* God is incredibly generous. God says, *you can do whatever you want with ninety percent of that!* I just want you to give ten percent of it back to me. That's the *tithe*. We should feel fortunate; in the days of the early church, the apostles asked all the early Christians to give *everything* they owned to the church. *All* their possessions would be sold, and the wealth would be re-distributed through the whole community, as any had need. Anyone who defied that practice was subject to the judgment of the apostles, and the judgment of God. God doesn't ask that much from us anymore. God just wants *ten percent*. A *tithe*.

Tithing began when Abraham, in the book of Genesis, gave a tenth of his entire net worth to the priest of God Most High. He did that *voluntarily*, of his own free will, under no compulsion. Tithing was formally established in the legal books in the Old Testament. Later, biblical prophets chastised Israelites who failed to tithe, accusing them of robbing from God. Tithing is mentioned numerous times in the New Testament, but the emphasis there is more on *generous giving* and *sacrificial self-offering* than a specific percentage; Jesus tells his followers that it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God, and he praises the poor widow's generous gift to the temple treasury. Generosity is one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit; it is an essential ingredient in a faithful Christian life. Tithing remains today an excellent practice for Christians who desire to be faithful to God.

How do you tithe? Simple. Take your income, divide it by ten, give that amount to the church. If you live off of investments, every time you make a withdrawal, take ten percent of that amount, and give that. Or, here's a different way to look at it: take a look at your most recent Form 1040, look at the line where you enter your "adjusted gross income," divide that number by ten, and then compare that amount to the amount you give to God. Are you in the general ballpark? Or are you not even remotely close? Are there some things you may need to *sacrifice* in your life in order to be more faithful to God? Sacrifices can be painful. I'm sure that Jesus did not *enjoy* the process of sacrificing his life for your benefit. But the benefits on the other side are *immeasurable*. Oh, the joy that comes, when you know that you are doing your fair share, when you are seeing the blessings that come from your generosity!

Why do I bring this up? Because if you take the total amount that people give to the church, and divide that by the number of households in the church, you get an amount for the average annual contribution. If every household is tithing, that would mean that the average household income here is

about \$25,000. When I look out at the congregation, it doesn't look to me like most people here are that impoverished! Besides – we paid off a \$900,000 mortgage in six years! There are *clearly* financial resources here. There is always strong support for special projects and building upgrades. But when it comes to *basic, regular giving*, the evidence suggests that quite a number of households are a long ways from offering a tithe. Which, honestly, isn't fair to those in our midst who *do* give generously to the church's basic operations. Nowhere does the Bible suggest that it's okay to give to special projects and *not* give generously for the basic operations of the church. That's the *opposite* of the biblical principle.

But, I suspect that some of you will not be persuaded by the biblical principles. Some of you may need to come at this from a different angle. How much does it cost to run a church? *A lot*. Do you enjoy having heat and air conditioning here? That costs us, on average, more than \$500 a week. Do you like it that we have an education program for children and youth – which, I believe, is the second largest such program among the Presbyterian churches in greater Lansing? That costs us about \$700 a week. Are you worshipping from home? We just spent *thousands* of dollars upgrading our platform. I could go on and on. Running a church is *expensive*. Most places we do business with don't give us any discounts. We have to pay the same rates as any other organization or business. Running a church ain't cheap!

There's also the reality that we are understaffed. When I arrived here 13 years ago, we had a webmaster who took care of the church web page. She moved away; then the position was cut in a budget crunch. Managing the website became one of my responsibilities – and the *complexity* of that responsibility has increased considerably with the pandemic. I now spend about two hours every week posting the worship service online and keeping the calendar up to date. I also spend about two hours every week trying to keep five church computers and our WiFi network in good working order. That shouldn't be my job. But we don't have somebody else to do it, and it *has* to be done, or else Sheren and Lori and I run into problems. I also spend about 30 minutes every week keeping us in compliance with music copyright laws. That landed in my lap when Darlene retired. These PowerPoints that we are now using in worship – it takes me about 30 to 45 minutes to create a new one each week. All of that adds up to about 5 hours a week that I'm spending on tech matters that *could* be given to someone else – *if* we had the money in the budget for such a person. We've been trying to get a tech position into the budget for three years now. Imagine what I could do with an additional 20 hours a month! Resume offering a Bible study. Visit our homebound members more frequently. Deal with the large piles of church paperwork that have accumulated in my house and in my office. Maybe even catch up on the many tasks on my "to do" list that I have never been able to get to. Every day I do triage – focusing my time and energy on the matters of greatest urgency and highest importance for the good of the church. Every day there are *dozens* of things I don't manage to get to. That's not a time management issue – that's a reflection of the reality that more and more critical and technical tasks keep landing in my lap.

Really, it all comes down to money. It comes down to *your* generosity. Your support of the basic operations of the church, so we can be *adequately* staffed, so we can give our employees fair cost-of-living adjustments ('cause there's this thing called inflation!), and so we can be *expanding* our ministry over time, rather than shrinking it – which, frankly, is what we may have to do this year.

One final comment. I'd like to think we have a culture here of *generous support* for the basic operations of the church. We've made strides – there's no question about that! – but it's clear that we have a long way to go. We have a lot still to *learn* – and put into *practice* – in *generosity* and *sacrifice*.

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