

“The First Principle”

To begin with, we’re going to head back to the Old Testament to get some context for this matter of trusting God with our finances. **Live like no one else so you can live like no one else!**

“Then the LORD said to Moses,² ‘Dedicate (*consecrate*) to me every firstborn among the Israelites. The first offspring to be born, of both humans and animals, belongs to me.’”
Exodus 13:1-2 (NLT)

“... you must present all firstborn sons and firstborn male animals to the LORD, for they belong to him.¹³ A firstborn donkey may be bought back (*ransomed*) from the LORD by presenting a lamb or young goat in its place. But if you do not buy it back, you must break its neck. However, you must buy back every firstborn son.”
Exodus 13:12-13 (NLT)

[All firstborn male humans (firstborn females were exempted) were to be redeemed (*padah*) or “bought back at a price” (fixed at five shekels per male – Num 18:16; 3:46-47), and donkeys were to be “bought back” by a lamb or kid since donkeys were unclean animals and therefore unfit for sacrifice. To prevent any refusal to follow this command to ransom their animals, the Israelites were to kill them by breaking their necks.]

Let’s talk about the principle of the **FIRST** ...

1. The Firstborn Must Be Sacrificed or Redeemed

First Corinthians 10:11 says that the O.T. is an example to us, written for our instruction. So the instruction we see is that the firstborn must be sacrificed or redeemed.

If you had an animal that was considered a clean animal (**lamb**), then you sacrificed the firstborn. If your animal was considered an unclean animal (**donkey**), then you had to sacrifice a clean animal to redeem the unclean animal.

This principle points to Jesus. It’s all an example for us. If it’s unclean, it has to be redeemed with the sacrifice of the clean. And if it’s clean, it has to be sacrificed. We are all born with a sin nature. Jesus was born sinless (clean). He was sacrificed so that we (unclean) could be redeemed!

Jesus came with the desire that we would give our lives to Him. He didn’t wait to see if we would straighten up and then come. So the Father gives His Son before anyone believes in Him (while we were still sinners, Christ died for us!). Jesus (the Son) was God’s (the Father) tithe! **He gave Jesus as the sacrifice, FIRST.** This is a principle all through Scripture.

We gather together on the first day of the week and when you begin your week with God, the rest is blessed. When you begin your day with God the rest is blessed. When you give the first portion of your finances to God, the rest is blessed. **That’s this principle ... the firstborn must be sacrificed or redeemed.**

2. The Firstfruits Must Be Offered

“The first of the firstfruits of your land you shall bring into the house of the LORD your God.”
Exodus 23:19 (NKJV)

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“**Honor** the LORD with your possessions, And with the firstfruits of all your increase; ¹⁰ So your barns will be filled with plenty, And your vats will overflow with new wine.”

Proverbs 3:9-10 (NKJV)

God said that when an animal has a baby, whatever it is, they were to sacrifice the first one. Now that takes faith! He didn't say, 'Wait until the animal has ten offspring and then give me the tenth one.' He said, '*Give me the first one and the rest will be blessed*'.

This is something about tithing that many people never understood ... it's 10% so that every person can give. It's a percentage that levels the playing field. And it's the first 10%. It's very important for us to understand that. It takes faith to give the first 10% and then pay the bills, not pay the bills and see if you have enough left over for God.

You need to understand something about God, **God will always be first**. God is first, whether you put Him first or not. This is all about the preeminence of God, He's above all, before all, higher than all, first of all. A great example of this when Israel began to enter the Promised Land.

“Do not take any of the things set apart for destruction, or you yourselves will be completely destroyed, and you will bring trouble on the camp of Israel. ¹⁹ Everything made from silver, gold, bronze, or iron is sacred to the LORD and must be brought into his treasury.”

Joshua 6:18-19 (NLT)

Why did God say this? Jericho was the first city. Here's what God was saying, '*Give Me the first and the rest are blessed*'. He didn't say, 'Conquer ten cities and then give me one. As soon as they disobeyed, the second city, Ai, was not blessed. They had to get that right before they could conquer the rest of the promised land.

Let's go further back for a moment. Remember Adam & Eve's children? Why did God accept Abel's offering, but He didn't accept Cain's? You cannot understand this unless you understand the principal of firstborn and firstfruits. Remember, the firstborn and the firstfruits you give to God.

“When it was time for the harvest (*process of time*), Cain presented some of his crops as a gift to the LORD. ⁴ Abel also brought a gift—the best of the firstborn lambs from his flock. The LORD accepted Abel and his gift, ⁵ but he did not accept Cain and his gift. This made Cain very angry, and he looked dejected.”

Genesis 4:3-5 (NLT)

In essence it's saying that Cain gave what he wanted when he wanted. How many of us still do that today? We say, *I give when I feel led*. That's like saying *I love my wife when I feel led*.

God couldn't accept Cain's offering. There are some things God CAN'T do – outside of His character. Examples: God can't change (immutability) because if He could change He could get better and He can't get better because He's best. God can't think ... the way we think (omniscience) – He knows everything all at the same time; nothing has ever occurred to God; He's never said, *You know what I just thought of?* ☺ God can never be second either (preeminence). If He plays a round of golf His score will be 18! ☺

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3. The Tithe Must Be First

(Who has a \$100 bill?)

“One tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD and must be set apart to him as holy.”

Leviticus 27:30 (NLT)

The word ‘holy’ it means set apart, it means designated for another purpose. The tithe is set apart, its holy, it belongs to God. This is the same language as firstborn and firstfruits ... it’s the Lord’s! People say, “*Well, tithing was under the Law, and I’m not under the Law as a Christian, I’m under grace so I don’t tithe.*”

“The purpose of the tithe is to teach you to always put God first in your lives.”

Deuteronomy 14:23 TLB

Tithing was way before the Law. Jacob tithed 400 years before the Law. Abraham tithed between 400-500 years before the Law. Before the Law they gave 10%.

If you go all the way back to Cain and Abel you’ll see it and even in the Garden God said; ‘You can eat from any tree except that one, that one is mine’. He was putting stewardship into His people. The tithe was not only before the Law, it was after the Law.

“What sorrow awaits you teachers of religious law and you Pharisees. Hypocrites!

For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith.

You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things.”

Matthew 23:23 (NLT)

If the One who saved me said you ought to, that’s enough! But if we’re throwing out the Law ... what about honoring our parents, murder, adultery, etc. If you say you’re under grace then be advised, grace goes FARTHER than the Law! ☺ The early church followed this too ...

“Now regarding your question about the money being collected for God’s people in Jerusalem.

You should follow the same procedure I gave to the churches in Galatia. ² On the first day of each week, you should each put aside a portion of the money you have earned. Don’t wait until I get there and then try to collect it all at once.”

1 Corinthians 16:1-2 (NLT)

What releases the blessing on our finances is not the amount, but the order. It’s the FIRST 10%.

Every time you get paid you take a test. (**Ten \$1 bills; online giving**) The test is whom are you going to honor for your income? And you honor the first person you give to.

Let’s turn our attention to the last book of the OT – Malachi. Hundreds of years prior to this prophet coming on the scene, God had told His people that whenever it was time for them to bring a lamb to the temple as a worship offering, they should walk through their herds and find the very best lamb – the blue ribbon lamb – the one that would bring the most money at the marketplace if they were going to sell the lamb. “*Make an excellent worship offering when you make one,*” was God’s request. That’s the standard.

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Part of the reason why God wanted them to bring their best lamb was because hundreds of years later He would send Jesus into the world as His Lamb that would take away the sins of the world, God knew He was going to give His best Lamb. So all the way back in the Old Testament sacrificial system, He was predicting that. But then came Malachi’s day ...

“When you give blind animals as sacrifices, isn’t that wrong? And isn’t it wrong to offer animals that are crippled and diseased? Try giving gifts like that to your governor, and see how pleased he is!” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. ⁹“Go ahead, beg God to be merciful to you!

But when you bring that kind of offering, why should he show you any favor at all?” asks the LORD of Heaven’s Armies. ¹⁰“How I wish one of you would shut the Temple doors so that these worthless sacrifices could not be offered! I am not pleased with you,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, “and I will not accept your offerings.” ¹¹ But my name is honored by people of other nations from morning till night. All around the world they offer sweet incense and pure offerings in honor of my name. For my name is great among the nations,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.”

Malachi 1:8-11 (NLT)

Sacrifice time comes, they begrudgingly walk around in their herds looking for the worthless lamb and they put it on the altar and say, “*There’s Your worship offering, God. Hope You like it.*”

Malachi, sent by God to talk to the people about this, says, “*Hey people, God doesn’t like it. He really doesn’t. He doesn’t like it at all.*” In fact, the whole deal offends Him to the point where Malachi says in this text, “*Better you bring no lamb at all, than you bring a blemished one.*”

MANY PEOPLE LIVE OUT THEIR SPIRITUALITY TRYING TO FIGURE OUT HOW TO DO THE BAREST MINIMUM FOR GOD WITHOUT INCURRING HIS DISPLEASURE.

Many people live by simply giving God leftovers—leftover time, leftover energy, leftover talent, leftover money and leftover love. **In what areas are you giving God your left-overs?**

Let’s examine God’s divine pattern of excellence ...

1. Creation of Heavens & Earth - Grand Canyon, Niagara Falls or the Great Barrier Reef
2. Creation of People – bodies, minds, spirits & souls – marvelously complex creatures
3. Mercy, Patience, Guidance, Protection & Provision – when human beings rebel against Him. He keeps loving and working with them century after century, millennium after millennium.
4. Jesus – set the eternal standards for excellence in teaching, wisdom, integrity, love, death, resurrection & ascension.
5. Holy Spirit – each of His followers could become carriers of His power and His presence.
6. Church – to express His love to a love-starved world throughout the generations, and give His followers a family of faith to belong to and a mission to commit their lives to.
7. Eternity – for all of us who put our faith and trust in Jesus.

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How should we respond to the excellent activities of God? What kind of worship offering do you bring to an excellent God? What kind of lamb am I bringing to God these days?

Malachi calls us to make an unconditional, carte blanche commitment to God because of His unconditional, carte blanche commitment to us – my best for His best, His best for my best.

“God, I formally take the limits and the conditions off my commitment to You. I’ll do Your bidding, whatever it is. I’ll obey Your will and Your ways. I’ll go where You ask me to go. I’ll say ‘yes’ to the promptings of Your Spirit as I understand them. I’ll live out this unconditional commitment even if it costs me everything.”

God wants you to wrestle with how you can take your best talents and your best abilities and the best energies of your life, and figure out how to invest them in ways that further His purposes in this world.

Here’s the standard: your best commitment, affection and the best contributions of your skills and talents – for the One who’s never given less than His best for you every day of your life. And that will go on all the way through eternity – the best for the best. Someday, you’re going to stand in front of the Best and your eyes are going to behold God and His glory and Jesus in His splendor. And you will be so glad that you gave the prized lamb of your commitment, your affection, your skills and talents to God every day of your life. Don’t give Him a blemished lamb!

“Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! “But you ask, ‘What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?’ “You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me.”⁹ You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me.”¹⁰ **Bring** all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won’t have enough room to take it in! **Try it! Put me to the test!**”¹¹ Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.¹² “Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.”

Malachi 3:8-12 (NLT)

Hundreds of years prior to Malachi’s writing this text, God had spelled out for people how they ought to handle their money excellently. God says, “*Here’s the guidelines: Earn money ethically—no schemes, no corruptions, no back door deals, no gray. Earn money; you can earn a lot of it if you want, that’s great.*”

Earn money ethically; spend money wisely, not foolishly or carelessly; avoid destructive debt; save money consistently for your future; give money to the poor generously. And as a part of the overall financial money management practices that God lays out, He says, “*And I’m establishing the practice of tithing.*” The Hebrew word that’s translated as tithe is the word *maaser* ... it literally means a tenth (10%).

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The idea behind the practice was that God’s people would take 10% of whatever increase they experienced in their work-a-day world, and they would bring it to their worship place as a symbol of their gratefulness to God for His giving them material blessings, and then for the secondary and practical purpose of supporting the ministry of their worship center.

For a long time, people carried out God’s guidelines just as God had outlined them. People did their money management in an excellent way. And everybody won during that time in the history of God’s people. I mean, the people themselves won because their finances stayed under control. They stayed out of financial difficulties, didn’t go into debt, they had savings, they gave to the poor, they brought the full tithe.

God won because He was honored and given thanks for His graciousness. Temple ministries were adequately resourced. Everybody won. But then comes Malachi’s day when the standard of financial excellence had fallen and fallen hard. In spite of being taught since the time of their youth about how to honor God with their resources, one by one, men and women began to make unwise and dishonoring financial decisions. They just started making up their own rules.

And if you can believe it, in Malachi’s day people decided to make up for their financial foolishness by reducing their tithes and offerings that were supposed to be going to God, and in some cases, not giving them at all.

Malachi says, “Every time you bring less than the full ten percent of your earnings to God, you’re ripping off the One who gave His very, very best for you.” This is the one place that God says, you can prove that I exist. He says try tithing. He says just give Me 10% and watch what I’ll do in return. Take God at His word. Take a step of faith. Accept the challenge. And if you are not tithing, start tithing as God has commanded us to do.

Now, of course, with all these promises in the Bible, there are premises. And God says, “*You do this and I’ll do this.*” And in this verse, He said, “*You give and I’ll give to you.*” Now, of course, we always say, “*okay, God, you go first. You bless me and then I’ll give to you.*” God says, “*no, no, no. That doesn’t require any faith. You prime the pump. You go first.*” Why? Because that requires faith. And what God is most pleased with is our faith.

How do you look at a blood-stained cross and an empty tomb? How do you look at a rock solid promise of a home in heaven forever and ever and ever and then quibble over giving 10% of the earnings that God Himself has made it possible for you to make in the first place?

Malachi would say, “*Don’t raise your hands in worship to God saying, ‘I give Him my everything,’ while you’re robbing Him of the barest minimum of what He asks you to do in His name.*” And sooner or later, you have to come to an intensely personal decision about these matters. You’ve got to do a heart check. This is not fundamentally about money. This is about how you feel about the One who gave His life for you.

God never uses the word **GIVE** when He talks about tithing. You want to know why? Because you can’t give what doesn’t belong to you. **He uses the word BRING**. Bring the tithe into the storehouse. *I don’t want what belongs to God in my house; I want to take it to His house.*

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Guilt Free Zone ... Tithing requires faith! W/O faith it's impossible to please God. (% Givers!)

Struggling To Fully Have Faith (Trust) Christ Follower

100%

A → B

Faith-Filled (Fully Trusts) Christ Follower

90%

A → B → C

C = the place of blessing and the favor of God.

Both have an interesting perspective on the other. They both think the other is “crazy.” **Which crazy do you want to be?** ☺ My life is a B-C Story! I want that for you! (Automatic/Online Givers)

Note: Charity vs. Tithing ... Tithing is undesignated. You come and you lay it at the feet of God and say, *God, however YOU want this spent*. Whenever I *designate* the giving, it's not tithing.

When you tithe, it provides for God's work in and through His church, the church for which Jesus died. God loves His church and when you tithe the church moves forward and through Jesus the local church is the hope of the world.

RCC's Use Of God's Resources: I'm thankful and proud of how we're leveraging what you return to God through the tithe.

Invest in the Next Generation ...

Create Sacred Spaces ...

Reach beyond our walls ...

You tithe, we manage wisely, and the local church makes a huge difference. If people would tithe and we could manage it wisely we wouldn't need the government to help people who are in need because the church would already be there doing what we were called to do. Unapologetically, I tell you beyond a shadow of a doubt that the tithe provides for the work of God through His church!

I would argue there are few if any more tangible measurements of where you actually can see that you put God first. Show me your bank statement and I can see if you put God first. But this has implications in every area of life ... marriage, parenting, weekly worship, daily devotions in the morning, etc. Many of us need to reprioritize our lives completely around God!

It takes faith to give first. If God gives me \$100 and I give Him \$10 first, it takes faith to believe He'll stretch the other \$90. If I give Him what's left over and what's last and whenever I feel like it, that doesn't take faith. And without faith Scripture says, it's impossible to please God.

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The tithe is for beginning givers, yes we honor God with that ... but we also give offerings, offer justice ... extend mercy ... take care of widows, orphans and those in need! Jesus makes it more than just 10% ... it's everything; your whole life, all of you, you make everything you have available to the Kingdom of God for His service.

Tithing also builds my faith in God. If we sat down and had coffee and you said; *“I don't have a lot of faith in God right now.”* A fair question for me to ask is, *“Are you a tither?”* And chances are you're going to say, *“No,”* because tithing actually builds our faith in God.

This is beyond a financial blessing and God is not a cosmic slot machine. As we trust God in this area we can see marital relationships deepen, parent/child relationships strengthened, families serving the Lord together ... even miracles of healing, restoration and bondages broken.

I tell you I can see the tithers, I can pick you out when I'm talking about this because you're nodding and smiling because you've seen the faithfulness of God. You have your own stories of how He has come through for you and you have seen His goodness. Somehow, miraculously with the presence of God you've discovered that 90% with the blessings of God goes further than 100% without the blessings of God.

Why do we tithe? It's an act of worship. He gave to us, we faithfully worship Him. We don't serve money, we're not going to be in bondage to money, we serve God. It's a tangible way of putting Him first, *“God I worship You with this”*.

Let's return one final time to Exodus 13 ...

“And in the future, your children will ask you, ‘What does all this mean?’ Then you will tell them, ‘With the power of his mighty hand, the LORD brought us out of Egypt, the place of our slavery. ¹⁵ Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, so the LORD killed all the firstborn males throughout the land of Egypt, both people and animals. That is why I now sacrifice all the firstborn males to the LORD—except that the firstborn sons are always bought back.’”
Exodus 13:14-15 (NLT)

Illustration: Teaching Joshua & Jenna to tithe using the Burkett bank; check giving records for those who want to date our kids; why would I let them date a THIEF?!

Let's Pray!

“When someone has been given much, much will be required in return; and when someone has been entrusted with much, even more will be required.”
Luke 12:48 (NLT)

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Are you giving God your first and best? Why or why not?

Share a time when your faith grew as a result of your giving. What did you learn about God from your experience?

How can tithing be a form of accountability for you?

What are some of the barriers you’ve faced or are facing that keep you from tithing?

What are some of the things God is doing through RCC that you are most excited about?

Why do you think Malachi 3 is the only place in the Bible where God asks us to test Him?

What is the connection between our hearts and our giving?

Resources: “Multiply” series by Robert Morris, Gateway Church, TX; Lifechurch.tv; “Be Rich” series by Andy Stanley; “Living Excellent Lives” series by Bill Hybels & “Strapped” series by Craig Groeschel