

“The Call of Willing Obligation”

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Introduction:

Sometimes you and I might think, “When I get more money I’ll start tithing.” But most people whom we know who are identified as millionaires or billionaires started out small. And many built what they have done on the tithe. I often think of the example of billionaire John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

Rockefeller decided to pay an allowance to his five sons. According to his son Nelson, “We got 25 cents a week, and had to earn the rest of the money we got.” To earn part of that extra money he raised vegetables and rabbits. “We always worked,” Nelson said. All the boys were required to keep personal daily account books. They were required to give 10 percent of their income to charity, to save 10 percent, and to account for all the rest.

The Rockefellers, like many of the early North American billionaires, looked upon their wealth as a sort of spiritual stewardship. Most of them believed that God gave them the money. It wasn’t theirs, they just were caretakers over it. They felt a duty to manage it for the betterment of others—while still thoroughly enjoying it themselves, of course. If every dollar they received was a gift from God, they were glad to pay 10 percent of it back. (If I gave you a dollar, would you give me ten cents back?) Rockefeller paid a 10 percent tithing on all of his earnings for his entire life. He assumed that God was his silent partner.

Rockefeller never forgot where he came from, even in the midst of his great success. Most importantly, he never forgot the source of his wealth, which is why he was willing to give back. Being a steward was essential to him. Many normal societal functions were helped by this man’s donations and also many charities were impacted for their betterment. (Don Hawks.)

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This type of giving is found within 2 Chronicles 31:5-6:

⁵As soon as the order went out, the Israelites generously gave the firstfruits of their grain, new wine, oil and honey and all that the fields produced. They brought a great amount, a tithe of everything. ⁶ The men of Israel and Judah who lived in the towns of Judah also brought a tithe of their herds and flocks and a tithe of the holy things dedicated to the LORD their God, and they piled them in heaps. (NIV)

Lead-In:

Spiritual reform had come to the nation of Israel under Hezekiah. The Temple was rededicated and restored to its place within society. The earlier rule of other kings had displaced and stopped Temple worship. This was clearly against the heritage and call of God that had been placed upon the nation of Israel. The nation and its king were to place God at the center of their lives, with the Temple being not simply a symbol, but the place of God's presence.

Hezekiah was able to reinstate Temple worship and the system that came with it. A return is shown that denotes Israel's past and tradition. The people of Israel were then called upon to bring forth the firstfruits of the harvest and all that the fields gave. The text explains that they gave "a tithe of everything." Three calls are revealed through this reform that still resonates with us today.

Body:

1. Call of No Exemption:

This restoration by Hezekiah echoes the tradition of Solomon, when he dedicated the Temple for the worship of God. Israel had gone so far away from what God had

wanted from them. Finally what had been established at the beginning of the nation now was coming again.

2 Kings 18:5-6 states that **“⁵Hezekiah trusted in the LORD, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him. ⁶ He held fast to the LORD and did not cease to follow him; he kept the commands the LORD had given Moses” (NIV).**

Leaders and popular figures in our society have a major image to maintain. [Insert current event.] Many of these individuals are either placed on a pedestal or deeply ridiculed. Everyday the tabloids read of someone doing something wrong or crazy. Once a particular story is made known, a huge storm descends upon those involved. Chaos seems to reign in the lives of these people. Integrity and humility seem to be missing within these contexts and situations, because nothing seems to change in many respects.

Out of obedience to the Lord, Hezekiah was able to bring back the old system. Before commanding the people to tithe to the Lord, Hezekiah first had to be a king of integrity. No one was exempt from his commands. Hezekiah even offered a tithe to the Lord, which, again, echoes the tradition of Solomon. All of Israel was commanded to bring forth a tithe to the Lord so that the Levites might be taken care of, but ultimately that Israel might show its heart for God. The same is true for us, because we need to be people of integrity. The tithe means nothing, unless it is done for the glory and honor of God. God must be placed at the forefront of who we are.

2. Call of Willing Obligation:

Hezekiah called upon the people of Israel to bring forth an offering of what they had produced. This was a command from the king. The message went first to Jerusalem and then out into the countryside. The people of Israel were called upon to maintain the Temple and the Levites who presided there. Time prior to the proclamation of Hezekiah showed an unwillingness to give; however, great generosity was shown by

the people and abundant amounts of crops and other items were collected. The apostle Paul in writing to the Corinthians resonates with this idea of willing obligation.

2 Corinthians 8:7-8 states:

⁷But just as you excel in everything in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in your love for us see that you also excel in this grace of giving. ⁸I am not commanding you, but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others. (NIV)

Obligation seems to carry a negative connotation with it. In our society today, obligation is found to be something inconvenient and time-consuming with little merit. As a teenager, I had the wonderful task of taking out the trash. Now, that might not seem to be a major task, but it usually entailed carting ten huge bags down to the dumpster. My mind always said before beginning the task, "Boy I wish I had someone else to do this task!" I wanted to just sit around and take it easy, while just allowing the trash to sit and rot. The task even continued into my college years, which has now become a joke with my parents.

As Christians, we have obligations just as the nation of Israel did. We also share with them in a willing obligation that is done out of generosity and love for God. Now the church does not function as the Temple in the idea of sacrifices or system. However, the basic principle of mediation is found as a link between the church and its importance in the world. The church cannot survive without willingness on the part of the people who comprise it. Being generous stewards requires us to give of our time, energy, and money. These are vital parts of our society, but should be focused upon God.

3. Call of Blessing:

Hezekiah and the nation of Israel were able to maintain the Temple system and worship God, because of God's faithfulness and blessing. The willingness that was displayed through the work of the people and Hezekiah could not have been

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accomplished without the blessing of God upon them. Israel was simply giving back what it had received from the Lord.

Naomi speaks of this blessing given by the Lord in Ruth 2:20: **“Naomi said to her daughter-in-law, ‘May he be blessed of the LORD who has not withdrawn his kindness to the living and to the dead’” (NASB)**. This small verse is packed with the faithfulness and blessing of God. There is no stopping with God, because he will continue to work for the good of his people and work beyond our conceived possibilities.

This blessing of God also appears in Malachi 3:10: **“‘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’” (NIV)**. This evokes a challenge from God to bring forth offerings to Him and be good stewards of what we have been given. We are to be “blessing-dispensers,” because we have had God’s blessing and grace dispensed to us.

The imagery of blessings being poured out like the opening of the floodgates upon God’s people is very powerful. At various times during year, watching the Weather Channel brings a vivid picture of flood waters, and it seems that the mighty Mississippi River is almost always a centerpiece of flood coverage. The National Guard and local people always try to provide reinforcement to various dams and flood walls, but the rising water usually has the last say in the matter. It spills over the reinforcements and permeates every crack and crevasse even in places where it appears there is no room.

God not only seeks to bless His people, but *does* bless His people. The floodgates of blessing are opened, so that we might again be “blessing-dispensers.” This only comes when we recognize that God is our source and is faithful to His word.

Conclusion:

Through the example of Hezekiah and the nation of Israel, we are provided with an example of what it means to be stewards of what God has provided for us. Integrity was central to who Hezekiah was and found him focused upon the Lord. Willing

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obligation provided the context for the giving of the people, but also coming to understand who the supplier of blessings was. The same is true for us as Christians today. We must seek to first be God-focused people, who live lives of integrity. Through this integrity and God-focus should emerge the idea of willing obligation because we give out of love and reverence for God.

Again, being stewards of what God has given us includes our time, strength, and money. Nothing is to be left or excluded from God, for He is the One who provides for and blesses us. Stewardship must be a vital part in the lives of Christians. We are called not only to serve within the Body of Christ, but also to be a blessing due to the grace and blessing that we first received from God.