

# I Seek Not What Is Yours but You

by John Piper

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*The sermon emphasizes the importance of living a life of generosity and giving from the heart, rather than just following a certain percentage or rule.*

**Duration:** 36:04

**Scripture:** Numbers 18:21

**Topics:** "God Himself"

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## Description

In this sermon, the preacher focuses on the topic of giving and stewardship based on the teachings in the Bible. He emphasizes that giving should come from the heart, willingly and joyfully, rather than being forced or compelled by rules or laws. The preacher also highlights the promise that generous people will never run short, as God is able to provide abundantly for those who give. He references various Bible verses, such as Acts 2:44 and 4:35, which describe the early Christians selling their possessions and sharing with those in need. The sermon concludes with the preacher expressing his desire to be a minister of the word and praying for the advancement and joy of the congregation's faith.

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## Transcript

The following message is by Pastor John Piper. More information from *Desiring God* is available at [www.DesiringGod.org](http://www.DesiringGod.org). This morning's text is taken from 2 Corinthians, the 12th chapter, verses 11 through 21. I have been a fool, you forced me to it, for I ought to have been commended by you.

For I was not at all inferior to these superlative apostles, even though I am nothing. The signs of a true apostle were performed among you in all patience, with signs and wonders and mighty works. For in what were you less favored than the rest of the churches, except that I myself did not burden you? Forgive me this wrong.

Here for the third time I am ready to come to you, and I will not be a burden. For I seek not what is yours, but you. For children ought not to lay up for their parents, but parents for their children.

I will most gladly spend and be spent for your souls. If I love you the more, am I to be loved the less? But granting that I myself did not burden you, I was crafty, you say, and got the better of you by guile. Did I take advantage of you through any of those whom I sent to you? I urged Titus to go and sent the brother with him.

Did Titus take advantage of you? Did we not act in the same spirit? Did we not take the same steps? Have you been thinking all along that we have been defending ourselves before you? It is in the sight of God that we have been speaking in Christ, and all for your upbuilding, beloved. For I fear that perhaps I may come and find not what I wish, and that you may find me not what you wish, that perhaps there may be quarreling, jealousy, anger, selfishness, slander, gossip, conceit, and disorder. I fear that when I come again, my God may humble me before you, and I may have to mourn over many of those who sinned before and have not repented of the impurity, immorality, and licentiousness which they have practiced.

A few weeks ago, I spent four days up at Shalom House at our conference camp, and the text that probably gripped me most firmly and soaked through all of my prayers most completely was the text in verse 15 that was just read, I will gladly spend and be spent for your souls. The last morning I was there, I got up before breakfast and went down. If you've ever been there, you know it's the big bank of birch trees between the conference, the Shalom House and the lake.

Walked down through the birch trees, and there's a little rotten pier down there, and walked out on the frozen lake, and the snow had gathered on the pier like a big bread loaf, you know, like this. And I stood out at the end of the pier, and the sun was just coming up out there at the point where the cabins are, you know, on the beach. It was just coming up behind those trees, and I just stood there, tried to be as still as I could.

My ear flaps down, not hear anything but a little bird across the lake. And this word came to me, only live for what is essential, Piper. Only live for what is essential.

That's what was communicated to me. And I interpreted that from the word to mean, in my situation, with all joy, spend and be spent out for the souls of this people. And I came away from that retreat with a tremendous longing in myself to be a minister of the word and a prayer for the advancement and joy of your faith more adequately than I have been.

So when I pondered how to preach on tithing, which is what I had set myself to do sometime this year, I've only preached one message on giving in the last 18 months, so I don't think we're overdoing it. It was December of 80. The text that lay closest at hand was the one just before I will gladly spend and be spent out for your souls.

Namely, verse 14 here for the third time. I am ready to come to you and I will not be a burden for I seek not what is yours. I seek you.

I just love that sentence is a great sentence from the Apostle Paul, and that's the flag now that's waving over this sermon. That's the beginning and the middle and the end. I seek not what is yours, but you are.

I want to not what is yours, but you. I want to build a church in which it can never be said they honor me with their tithes, but their heart is far from me of whom it will never be said. Woe to you, Bethlehem of Minneapolis.

You tithe every honorarium and birthday gift and before taxes income, but have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy and faith. I seek not what is yours, but you, Jesus says to us today. How many marriages can you think of that have deteriorated into mere empty motions because husbands say could not understand or hear the silent yearnings of the wife? I don't want your money.

I want you. Or how many parents have lost their children because they could not interpret the strange signs of behavior that were saying, Daddy, I don't want your presence. I want you.

And how many tithing churchgoers are going to be lost to the kingdom because they never let the word come into their hearts. I seek not what is yours, but you. So let there be no mistaking it.

The point of this message is I seek not what is yours, but you. My desire is to spend and be spent out for your soul, not yourself. Life essential, not things is what counts, and it's the life of the heart.

Now, what I'd like to do is survey with you the Old and New Testament teaching about tithing and then draw some implications at the end about the way people who have first given themselves to the Lord will handle their possessions. So you can walk with me through the Old Testament if you want to look up the passages. Otherwise, you can jot them down or just listen.

The first time we encounter tithing is Genesis 14. Abraham is chasing Chedor Laomer, who has kidnapped his kinsmen lot from Sodom and taken a lot of booty with him. Abraham takes 300 men and goes after him and defeats him and gets his kinsmen and all the money back.

He's on his way home and out of nowhere comes this mysterious figure, Melchizedek, who is described in verse 18 as the priest of the Most High God. Very mysterious figure in the Old Testament. No one knows where he comes from or where he went.

Kind of a type of Christ Hebrews makes him out to be. But it says in verse 20 that Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. Now, nowhere in the Mosaic law, which came later, is there any instruction about giving a tenth of booty taken in battle to the priests or anybody? Evidently, then what's happening here is that this is a spontaneous expression of gratitude and delight in the God who just defeated his enemies for him and gave him such a great blessing.

And so the first thing we can see about tithing is that it's not a payment made to God to get him to do something for us. It's a response to God because of something he just did for us. That's a pattern we must never let out of our minds.

Next time we run into tithing is a few chapters later. Genesis 28 verse 22. Abraham's grandson this time, Jacob, is on his way out of town and is dreaming at Bethel.

He has this dream in which God says to him, I'm going to be with you. I'm going to give you a land. I'm going to make your descendants great.

And Jacob makes a vow to the Lord in verses 13 to 15 and closes his vow like this. And of all that thou givest me, I will give a tenth to thee. In other words, the object of tithing here, as far as Jacob is concerned, is everything he gets.

And he knows that everything he gets is from God so that we mustn't construe tithing. We're going to follow Jacob as taking a tenth of what we've produced and then transferring possession of it over to God. That's the wrong way of thinking.

God gives everything to us and it's still his. And evidently the tithe then is kind of like a symbol or a token that we're saying by giving up a tenth and having no more disposal over it. It's all yours to dispose of, as you will.

Here's a sign of that. Here's a token. You can do with this what you want.

So I think we shouldn't take tithing to mean that. Give God the ten percent and do it. The ninety percent, whatever you please.

God gave it all and we should probably think of ourselves then drawing the New Testament here for help as stewards, trustees of this larger big quest. Now get over to Moses and the law. There are two key texts within the Mosaic law.

The first one is Leviticus 27 verses 30 to 33, which goes like this Leviticus 27 30. All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord.

If a man wishes to redeem any of his tithe, he shall add a fifth to it. And all the tithe of herds and flocks and every tenth animal that passes under the herdman staff shall be holy to the Lord. Now, the main point of that text, I think, is to tell us what to tithe or to tell them what to tithe.

Tithe your field products, grain, tithe what comes off your trees, your fruit and the drink you make of it, and tithe your animals. That's the way they made a living with those things. And every tenth thing should go to the Lord.

Then Deuteronomy chapter 14 verses 22 to 29, Deuteronomy 14. Here, the focus is on the how the mechanics of tithing and what it's for, the purpose of it. You shall tithe all the yield of your seed, which comes forth from the field year by year and before the Lord, your God, in the place which he will choose to make his name dwell there, which I think is later Jerusalem.

You shall eat the tithe of your grain and your wine and of your oil and the firstlings of your herd and flock that you may learn to fear the Lord, your God, always. And if the way is too long for you so that you are not able to bring the tithe when the Lord, your God, blesses you because the place is too far from you, which the Lord, your God, chooses to set his name there. Set, then you shall turn it into money and bind up the money in your hand and go to the place which the Lord, your God, chooses and spend the money for whatever you desire, oxen or sheep or wine or strong drink, whatever your appetite craves.

And you shall eat there before the Lord, your God, and rejoice you in your household and you shall not forsake the Levite who is within your towns for he has no portion or inheritance with you and the end of every three years. You shall bring forth all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns and the Levite because he has no portion or inheritance with you and the sojourners and the fatherless and the widow who are within your town shall come and eat and be filled that the Lord, your God, may bless you in all the work of your hands that they do. Six observations very briefly about this text number one.

According to verse twenty three, they're supposed to be a yearly trip to the holy place, the place where God puts his name, his temple, I think Jerusalem there to take their tithe up there and eat it. Or at least eat part of it. It seems to be that the tithe is to be used as a as a feast of celebration of Thanksgiving of joy so that we mustn't reduce the tithe to a mere pragmatic means of supporting the temple or the Levites or whatever that is true, but evidently not the whole truth.

So they are to eat it with joy and gratitude because God doesn't need their money. He wants them, not what is theirs. Once their celebration, their heart, he thinks.

Second, verse twenty three says that the purpose is that they might learn to fear the Lord. So take a tenth of your year's produce, go to the holy place, offer it to the Lord, eat some of it in celebration and Thanksgiving that you may learn to fear him. Tithing is a means of remembering that we are so totally dependent on the Lord that we ought to fear not relying on him, fear displeasing him by joyless ingratitude.

Third. Provision was made for those who live way up north and suppose they had a hundred sheep they were supposed to give. You'll have to drive all those sheep to Jerusalem so they could sell the sheep, take the money, go to the Jerusalem, buy more sheep or buy whatever they wanted to and eat some of it and use it for what it was supposed to be used for some practical arrangements here.

Fourth, the tithe was not totally consumed, I don't think, because in verse twenty seven, the Levites who are scattered all over Judea and Samaria and Galilee don't have any land. That tribe wasn't given a portion. The tithe was to support the Levites who did the ministry of the temple.

So there was a very practical use of ministerial support that the tithe was supposed to function as. And then finally, or fifth, verses twenty eight and twenty nine describe a triennial tithe. I'm not quite sure about how this relates to the yearly tithe, but my guess is that this is a special summons for three needy classes, refugees, widows and orphans.

It's kind of like a benevolent fund, it seems, that's going to be replenished every three years by a special tithe for that purpose. And then sixth, the last point is that God promises blessing on people if they are faithful in this act of mercy to man and gratitude to God. So it would be good maybe at this point to add two additional comments to draw out these implications.

First, giving the tithe usually means giving it to men for God's sake. We talk about giving to God, but God doesn't take the money. People take the money or the sheep and they use them.

They use them for his glory. So we are giving to God honor, glory, praise as we give to men what they need, whether it's to the Levites or the refugees or the widows or the orphans or whatever. We honor God in that way.

And the other thing that we need to note is that God always honors people who tithe from a good heart of faith. They will never lack what they need to do his will and his bidding. And I think that's still true today.

I have never heard a story of anybody venturing out to give at least a tenth who wound up months or years later destitute and angry at God. Never have heard such a story. On the contrary.

Now, two other important passages in the Old Testament. Then we'll look at the new just briefly. Numbers 18, 21 to 24 and 2 Chronicles 31, 4 to 18.

Just one verse from each of those numbers 18, 24. The tithe of the people of Israel, which they present as an offering to the Lord. I have given to the Levites for their inheritance.

And then 2 Chronicles 31, 4. Hezekiah commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites that they might give themselves to the law. So the point of those two texts is just to stress that there is a very practical ministerial supporting dimension in this Old Testament system of tithing. The tithe was to support the temple, the Levites, the priests, the people who did the daily work of the ministry and didn't have fields and lands of their own.

Now, in summary, then, what we get from the Old Testament is that tithing goes all the way back before the law to Abraham, the father of the faithful, who evidently used it as an expression of gratitude and thanks to the Lord when there was no law to command it. Then it's brought into the Mosaic law and regulated for the purposes that God ordains within that particular system. Support for religious orders, religious feasting and offerings of thanksgiving to the Lord, the supporting of widows and orphans and refugees and so on.

The crying needs that the Christians or saints in that they were supposed to meet. Now, let's come over to the New Testament. It's a remarkably different picture in the New Testament.

Jesus mentions tithing twice. Matthew 23, 23. In each of these cases, he's warning the Pharisees about the legalistic abuse of tithing.

Matthew 23, 23. Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites, for you tithe, mint, dill and cumin. These herbs and have neglected the weightier matters of the law.

Justice, mercy, faith. These you ought to have done without neglecting the others. And then Luke 18 verses 9 to 14.

He tells this parable. You remember about the people who trusted in themselves. It says that they were righteous, despised others.

Two men went up into the temple to pray. One a Pharisee, the other a publican, a tax collector. And the Pharisee stood and prayed thus with himself.

God, I thank thee that I am not like other men, extortioners, unjust, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week and I give tithes of all that I get. And Jesus completes that parable to the effect that the sinner beating on his breast in repentance goes home justified.

The man who tithes with that attitude doesn't. So obviously Jesus does not consider tithing as a spiritual cure-all. It can be happening where there is great spiritual sickness.

He doesn't reject it. In fact, he affirms it for Israel. Don't neglect those things, he said.

But he's much more intent on the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith. You can tithe everything evidently and not be trusting God. And that would be a loss because Jesus wants us, not what is ours.

He wants to love our soul, not just our silver. Now, the Apostle Paul never mentions tithe, never once. And we don't know whether he taught his churches to tithe.

It's silence completely as far as Paul is concerned. But there are four principles of giving that are very easy to get from his letters. And here they are just in summary.

The first one from 1 Corinthians 16, 2. On the first day of the week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up as he may prosper. Principle number one. Regular laying aside according to your means.

Two. 2 Corinthians 8, 3. They gave according to their means and beyond their means of their own accord. So Christians ought to go beyond what they think they can stretch to.

Third, 2 Corinthians 9, 7. Each one must do as he has made up his own mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion. For the Lord loves a cheerful giver. So principle three is it's not laws or rules that are going to force us to give.

It ought to come from the heart, ungrudgingly, joyfully, because then God is very pleased, delights in that. And then finally, 2 Corinthians 9, 8. God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance so that you may always have enough of everything and provide an abundance for every good work. In other words, the promises made generous people will never run short.

They'll always have enough to keep on being generous. It's like a pipe. God says you empty it off, fill it.

The promise is there. The only other place in the New Testament now that tithing is referred to is Hebrews chapter 7. And there it's just referring to old Melchizedek again. And the point is he was like Jesus.

It really is not a teaching about tithing. That's a very incidental part of that text. So as far as positive, explicit teaching about tithing, the New Testament is almost totally silent.

Now, why is that? I've been thinking a lot because to preach a sermon on tithing, I think you ought to be able to get something from the New Testament. I have a growing conviction that the reason the New Testament doesn't approach the issue of giving through confirming and teaching again tithing is because it wants us to ask a new question of ourselves. It does not want us to ask how much shall I give, but rather how much dare I keep.

Jesus is always more radical than percentages. And I think one of the differences between the Old Testament and the New Testament is that the Old Testament people of God were by and large not a missionary people. The New Testament people of God are fundamentally a missionary people.

They are given a mission to the whole world by Jesus. Now, that means that the burden laid upon the church is so unbelievably great that the needs in the world are so stupendous that an immense investment of money and commitment is required from the church. And it is so great that the thought of settling the issue of good stewardship in a world like that by referring to a percentage line is out of the question.

Utterly out of the question to think that by giving a tenth, we could settle that issue. My own conviction is that most middle and upper class Americans who tithe only are robbing God. I don't think tithing is an ideal.

I think those of us who make as much money as I do would be robbing God if we only tithe. In a world where 10,000 people a day are starving to death a day, and many, many more than that are perishing through unbelief, and our conference languishes with young people ready to go and no money to send them, the question is not, should I give a tenth, but how dare I keep how much I keep? How much dare I keep? It is a biblical truth beyond all question that everything you have is God's, and that you are a trustee on the foundation that God has entrusted you with. Your responsibility to use that money the way the giver designated it, namely, for his glory.

All of it, right? That means that it is irrational to think that giving 10% of that money to the church settles the issue of good stewardship. In a world of such immense need, in a country of such lavish luxury, and under a lord of such terrific power and sufficiency, there is no way that we can settle the issue of stewardship by saying, Shall I tithe or not? We can only settle it by asking how much of God's trust fund dare I use for overhead and administrative purposes at my house? I had every intention when I began this

message to say something like this. The Old Testament teaches tithing.

The New Testament, we're under grace and we know the Lord. How much more than should we do? Let us all tithe. It's an argument from lesser to greater.

If they had less revelation and did so much, we with so much more revelation, we should at least tithe. I find that just off-key in the New Testament. The New Testament just does not shoot for tithing.

It goes for broke. The word of God is always more radical than percentages to commend tithing as the ideal does not capture the New Testament spirit. Listen.

He who has two coats, let him share with him who has none. And if you have food, do likewise. Fifty percent, not ten percent.

Zacchaeus stood and said, Behold, Lord, half my goods I give to the poor. Fifty percent, not ten percent. Jesus said to the rich young man, If you would be perfect, go sell your possessions and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven and follow me.

Hundred percent, not ten percent. So therefore, whoever of you does not renounce all that he has cannot be my disciple. Hundred percent, not ten percent.

The man said to him, I will follow you wherever you go. Jesus said to him, Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head. Acts two forty four.

All who believed were together and had all things in common and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all as any had need. Acts four thirty five. There was not a needy person among them for as many as were possessors of lands or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of what was sold and laid it at the apostles feet.

Second Corinthians eight to in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty has overflowed in a wealth of liberality on their part, for they gave according to their means and beyond their means. So the best way that I know how to get at this spirit of stewardship in the New Testament is not to ask how much should I give? Can I afford a time alone, but rather how much of God's trust fund can I use to increase the number of comforts that I have in the world? The question before the church today in America is not the issue of tithing. It's the issue of exorbitant living standards.

The question is not can I give a tenth, but how dare I live on ninety percent? And behind that question is the question, do I love to use God's money, God's money? Do I love to use God's money to spread justice and mercy and joy in the world more than I love to use it to increase the number of comforts around the home? And during the summer. Will I be a steward or an embezzler of the trust fund that has been committed to me? The question whether the work of Christ here at Bethlehem in 1982 and our big fat budget now for this year is going to be met is very simply the question where your treasure is. And since I know from Scripture that where your treasure is there, your heart is.

Therefore, I say to you, I seek not what is yours, but you. Thank you for listening to this message by John Piper, pastor for preaching at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Feel free to make copies of this message to give to others.

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