

A Theology of Offerings

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- Scripture Reading: 1 Chronicles 29:1–22
- Psalter 133:all
- Psalter 342:2-3
- Psalter 183: all

We sing God's praises. We hear His Word read. We pray together. But then there is that moment when several men whom we call deacons, get up and pass around a collection plate into which people place money. Does that activity belong in a worship service? Wouldn't it be better to provide a box or some other means to gather the gifts of those who want to contribute? What about people who visit the church? Will they, because of this, think that the church is focused on money, that it is a money-making venture? Most importantly, what does God think of this activity being a part of a service dedicated to His praise and worship?

Let us pray to the Lord that our brief treatment of the subject of offerings may not only inform the mind but also stir the heart so that also this part of our worship service brings glory to God and holy gladness to our souls.

Our text is, in part, taken from 1 Chronicles 29:1-22. At this time, let us read again verses 10-14: "Wherefore David blessed the LORD before all the congregation; and David said, Blessed be thou, LORD God of Israel our father, for ever and ever. Thine, O LORD, is the greatness, and the power, and the glory, and the victory, and the majesty: for all that is in the heaven and in the earth is thine; thine is the kingdom, O LORD, and thou art exalted as head above all. Both riches and honor come of thee, and thou reignest over all; and in thine hand is power and might; and in thine hand it is to make great, and to give strength unto all. Now therefore, our God, we thank thee, and praise thy glorious name. But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able to offer so willingly after this sort? for all things come of thee, and of thine own have we given thee."

Setting

The setting of our chapter is relatively straightforward. King David is about to be succeeded by his son Solomon. Preparations are being made for the building of

the temple of the Lord. And these two matters are being brought before the assembled Israelites.

In anticipation of this momentous and important building project, David himself donates an enormous amount of his wealth to the work and encourages others to do likewise, which they subsequently do. But far from a mere fundraising drive, the whole tenor of this passage, and more particularly of the giving, is worship rather than mere philanthropy. It has a clear God-orientation. It is this orientation that we want to observe and impress upon our minds, not only from this passage of God's Word but from the principles we find in several places of Holy Scripture. Let us begin by first considering these passages to get a sense of the history and development of offerings in Scripture.

1. Bible history of offerings

It should be clear that the very word offering has a dual sense to it. On the one hand, we might think of the sacrifices that God instituted. From the very dawn of time, already seen at the time of Cain and Abel, such offerings pointed people to the coming Savior. They clearly teach that something other than ourselves is needed in order to please the Lord, know His favor, and enjoy His salvation.

But it ought also be clear to us that there soon developed another dimension to the whole idea of offerings in the history of redemption. God would have His people express their gratitude and their dedication to Him and His service by giving a portion of their goods as a sacrifice of praise to Him and as important symbolism that all that they were and all that they had they attributed to Him.

We see this aspect of the offering first expressed in Abraham's time. You may recall when that mysterious figure, Melchizedek, came to meet Abraham after Abraham defeated the assembled kings. Scripture says Abraham gave to Melchizedek "tithes of all."

This principle is seen much more clearly developed in the unfolding of regulations regarding offerings in the worship of Israel. Second Chronicles 29 speaks of "thank offerings." In other places, we read of various dedication ceremonies with their accompanying offerings. We also read instances where persons not only gave a tithe of their goods to the Lord but more besides out of a

sense of thankfulness. By the time Moses begins to foretell the temple that would one day be built in the Promised Land, he speaks of a variety of offerings spanning a plethora of expressions, saying in Deuteronomy 12:6-7, "Thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks: and there ye shall eat before the LORD your God, and ye shall rejoice in all that ye put your hand unto, ye and your households, wherein the LORD thy God hath blessed thee."

Our Lord, through the prophet Malachi, challenged Israel to continue offering to the Lord even when times were very difficult, encouraging their faith in Him by saying, "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" Mal. 3:10).

So our attention is drawn not only to Christ as the Savior, but also a thanksgiving to the Lord as His people's benefactor, the One who blesses, provides for, and protects His people.

When we consider the chapter that we read together, we see more than duty and obligation on display. There is real joy shown to the Lord. For example, in verse 2, David says, "Now I have prepared with all my might for the house of my God," and in verse 3, "Moreover, because I have set my affection to the house of my God, I have of mine own proper good, of gold and silver, which I have given to the house of my God, over and above all that I have prepared for the holy house." In verse 6, we read that the leaders then offered willingly. In verse 9, we read, "The people rejoiced for that they offered willingly." Upon seeing all this, David bursts forth in a prayer of praise (vv. 10ff). It is a marvelous prayer indeed in which David blesses God, extolling God's greatness and supremacy above all others, tracing all the blessings they enjoyed, including what they gave to Him, thanking God and praising Him for all, but then also counting it a peculiar blessing of God upon him and the people that they were able to give something of what He had given them.

But then notice in verse 17 how David fully recognizes that the outward act of

giving isn't enough to satisfy God, saying in prayer, "I know also, my God, that thou triest the heart and hast pleasure in uprightness." By grace, David could then add, "As for me, in the uprightness of mine heart I have willingly offered all these things: and now have I seen with joy thy people, which are present here, to offer willingly unto thee."

We find the same kind of attitude and practice in the New Testament church. In Acts 2, immediately after the spiritually refreshing outpouring of the Spirit of God, we read this description of the fledgling Christian church: "And they continued steadfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers... and all that believed were together and had all things common; and sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, praising God, and having favour with all the people."

A little later, in Acts 4, there is added, "Neither was there any among them that lacked: for as many as were possessors of lands or houses sold them, and brought the prices of the things that were sold, and laid them down at the apostles' feet: and distribution was made unto every man according as he had need."

Right after this, the Lord gives us Barnabas as a positive example of this spontaneous generosity and Ananias and Sapphira as wicked examples.

Our Savior also addressed the subject of offerings, laying down important principles that we ought to consider. But this consideration leads us to our second main point.

2. Biblical principles concerning offerings

It is important that we as Christians consider the histories that give us examples of giving, but we must then try, with God's help, to trace out principles that these histories and other texts of Scripture give us to help us develop a theology of giving. In this way, whatever decision we come to regarding offerings would be informed as much as possible by principles derived from God's Word.

As we do this, we need to realize that examples in the Bible are not always meant to be a pattern for what we ought to do. Sometimes God leaves on record

actions of people professing faith that are, upon further consideration, either not good in themselves (because ill motivations prompted them) or that prove to be unworthy of example because other passages of Scripture cast additional light on the matter, steering us away from them.

For example, the actions of Ananias and Sapphira were, on the surface, the same as others in the church. But the Word of God peels away the curtain, revealing their heart and showing that what appeared generous and good was really deceitful and wicked.

In the chapter we've been looking at, David, giving in the integrity of his heart much of his goods, actually announced to all Israel the quantity of his gift (vv. 4-5). This practice, because of what we learn in other passages of Scripture, would clearly not be something the church today would practice (see Matt. 6:3).

So we approach with prayer and care the process of deriving principles from Scripture. Perhaps it would be good to begin this section on principles by looking at our Lord's teaching in Matthew 6 since that is so often referenced in discussions about offerings. Consider verses 1-4;

Take heed that ye do not your alms before men, to be seen of them: otherwise ye have no reward of your Father which is in heaven. Therefore when thou doest thine alms, do not sound a trumpet before thee, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, that they may have glory of men. Verily I say unto you, They have their reward. But when thou doest alms, let not thy left hand know what thy right hand doeth: that thine alms may be in secret: and thy Father which seeth in secret himself shall reward thee openly.

It would appear at first glance that our Lord here condemns anything like giving of alms in a public setting, a point people raise in favor of having a box or some other means tucked away in a discreet place in the church so that a person's giving would be somewhat private.

But a careful reading of this passage and a comparison with other New

Testament texts shows that the operative words in this passage are "to be seen of them." "Take heed that ye do not your alms before me to be seen of them."

Notice how this caution, in almost exactly the same words, is given by Christ in His teaching on prayer. In verse 5, He says that the hypocrites pray publicly to be seen of men. In His teaching on fasting, Jesus says the same thing—that the hypocrites desire to appear unto men to fast. If our Lord truly meant that all prayer was meant to be in secret, then all corporate prayers found in the New Testament, and in families and church services today, would have to be counted disobedience to such a prohibition. A single example of God's conspicuously favorable response to the corporate prayer of the early church in Acts 4:23ff should be sufficient to prove that such a prohibition was not our Lord's intention in Matthew 6, namely, that all prayer should be done in secret. Yet it is true that all prayer must not be done to be seen of men, i.e., for the purpose of gaining favor or admiration of people.

Thus we apply this same understanding to Jesus' teaching regarding giving alms. If our Lord meant there was to be no giving of alms in a public setting, then the early church, under the direction of the apostles, must have missed that point entirely not long after the directive was given. In Acts 2 and 4, Christians would sell their possessions and, as described in Acts 4:34-35, "Brought the prices of the things that were sold and laid them down at the apostles' feet." When our Lord spoke to His disciples in Mark 12:42-44, He contrasted the rich and what they put into the temple treasury with the little bit which the widow contributed. He did not condemn either for doing what they did in a public manner, this being a practice dating back to Old Testament times. His observation instead concerned how sacrificial her giving was, putting all her living into the treasury as compared to the rich who gave only of their abundance.

In light of such passages, let us now proceed to set down some principles regarding giving, particularly in a worship context, as drawn from Scripture.

First, we find in both the Old and New Testaments the principle of expressing praise and thanksgiving to God by means of giving. This was obvious regarding that which we read about in 1 Chronicles 29, and it is also clearly part of the newly converted multitude's response to the gospel on the day of Pentecost and afterward.

Second, we certainly see that offerings of all kinds were woven by God into the public, corporate worship of the Old Testament church. As stated before, there were specific offerings for thanksgiving and for dedication of oneself to the Lord that were part of the ceremonial system God gave to Israel, pointing them to Christ.

Third, we see that the act itself is not sufficient for God to be pleased. One's inward motivation of heart is essential — that we do not give to impress others or even ourselves but instead to give as unto the Lord.

Fourth, Scripture teaches us to give willingly and cheerfully: “Every man according as he purposeth in his heart, so let him give; not grudgingly, or of necessity: for God loveth a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7). We see evidence of a corporate joy in both the ability to give and the willingness to give offerings to God, exemplified in the Old and New Testament passages we've been considering. A church should think long and hard before depriving God's people of the joy of praising and thanking God in this way.

Fifth, perhaps the biggest question one faces is whether the so-called regulative principle of worship warrants the inclusion of offerings in worship service. In other words, did the New Testament church include giving in their corporate worship?

Admittedly, good Christians differ as to their conclusions regarding this matter. The fact is, we have precious little detail given us in Scripture about just what a New Testament worship service looked like and consisted of. We do know, for example, that the Lord's Supper was celebrated by the church in a corporate, worshipful setting (1 Cor. 11:20ff). We know the saints gathered around the preaching of the Word (Acts 20:7). Gentile believers sang Psalms during worship services (1 Cor. 14:26). But do we have any indication that almsgiving had a part?

Perhaps it might be helpful in answering this question to ask a question. If offerings of thanks, praise, and alms were clearly an integral part of Old Testament worship, is it necessary for God to repeat Himself, as it were, for us to believe it is His will that this practice is to be continued in New Testament worship, especially if there is no indication of the abrogation of this practice?

We know the sacrifices are no longer part of New Testament worship because the book of Hebrews and other parts of God's Word clearly teach us that these

symbolic, ceremonial aspects of worship have been fulfilled by Christ and are therefore done away by Him. He is our great High Priest, our Passover Lamb, our everything. So even though, for example, the laying down of alms at the apostles' feet might not have been part of a formal worship service, such practices were clearly a vibrant part of the corporate life of the New Testament church and not simply individual Christians giving their alms solely by private means.

Furthermore, we also have that curious reference in 1 Corinthians 16:2 which reads, "Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come." Admittedly, this is not the easiest passage to understand. But we may at least discern, first, that the apostle is referring to almsgiving. That becomes very clear from the verses following (vv. 3-4), where he offers to accompany whomever the church appoints to bring the alms to the poor saints in Jerusalem. Second, the apostle purposely refers to the first day of the week, the day the New Testament church gathers for corporate worship. In this context, it appears the apostle is saying that on that day we ought to have our alms readied by the time we gather for worship, so there be no gatherings of alms. When the apostle comes to bring them the Word of God, he would not have them scrambling here and there at the last minute, preparing their gifts to the poor.

We should heed this exhortation ourselves. Perhaps all of us will at times forget to prepare our offering ahead of time. But if giving is to be part of our worship of God, we ought not only to prepare our hearts before coming to worship Him, but we should thoughtfully and prayerfully prepare our offerings as well. When the deacons alert us to special needs, we ought all the more seriously consider what we may do as opportunity presents itself to help (Prov. 3:28).

It is my desire to take this matter and elevate it, as Paul would say, to show you a more excellent way.

3. Biblical worship and offerings

In Hebrews 9:14 we read, "How much more shall the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without spot to God, purge your conscience from dead works to serve the living God?" At the first Lord's Supper,

Jesus said, "This is my body which is given for you." In Galatians 2:20, Paul writes, "I live by the faith of the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me." In the greatest act of public worship ever to take place on earth, the Lord Jesus gave Himself as an offering for the poorest of the poor. We are debtors to God in the greatest sense of the word; every sin we commit plunging us deeper into debt, every good thing that we omit doing sinking us deeper still. He gave not alms but Himself, to the death of the cross, so that our debts could be paid and our souls and lives cleansed from all sin.

"I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that ye present your bodies a living sacrifice, holy, acceptable unto God, which is your reasonable service." The offerings we give in church ought to be symbolic, representative of a wholehearted, whole-lived offering of ourselves unto God. Our bodies, our minds, our all were given to us by Him and ought to be yielded by us to Him in return. Isn't that what David said in the chapter we considered earlier? "O LORD our God, all this store that we have prepared to build thee an house for thine holy name cometh of thine hand and is all thine own." No, we can never throughout all eternity repay the Lord for all He has given us or done for us; that could never be. Yet it should be the desire of our hearts to do all that we can for the glory of Him that loved us and gave Himself for us. Is that the case with you, beloved? With me?

So I pray you, brethren and sisters in Christ, the next time the offering is received by the deacons and you reach out to put your alms in the plate or bag, please pray that this offering would be a token of your wholehearted surrender to the Lord, a giving of yourself in dedication and loving service to Him. What did He spare so that we might be saved? Nothing! "For ye know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that, though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, that ye through his poverty might be rich" (2 Cor. 8:9).

So let us never view the offering as just a "necessary evil" kind of thing. Let us participate wholeheartedly in this part of worship just as we do the rest: cheerfully, generously, and worshipfully, thinking each time again of the infinite sacrifice Christ made for us. May our response of praise to Him be as that which is expressed by Psalm 116:12, "What shall I render unto the LORD for all his benefits toward me?" Amen.