

Another Tax?

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Do you ever feel burdened under the weight of taxes? Do you tire of hearing about government's ever-expanding role as provider of services and "meeter" of needs? Does it seem that in the United States government spending has been out of control for years, government debt is increasing at an alarming rate, and government's encroachment into varying aspects of our lives is unabated? According to a recent column in *National Review Online*, Chris Edwards of the Cato Institute reported that the number of Federal Subsidy Programs (government aid) for 2008 grew to 1,804 from 1,645 in 2005 and 1,425 in 2000. Included in this government expansion are programs that in the past have been conducted by churches and non-profit charitable organizations (and funded by private citizens with specific interest in the causes). With more government involvement, and more people who believe the government should play the role of provider (and as a result take the aid, often to the exclusion of paying taxes), America may well be changing for the worse. As I often say in my seminars, "If you continue on the path you are currently traveling, where will you be 2, 5, or 10 years from now?" What will America look like in 2, 5, or 10 years? Based on the path government is traveling (and carrying America's citizens along for the ride), the dead-end up ahead looks ominous.

But, it hasn't always been this way.

There was a time when Christians understood the right way and the wrong ways to go about giving—be it to their local congregation in support of a multitude of outreach programs or even on an individual, case by case level. The fact is, that there will always be people who are

truly poor. Whether they are disabled people, orphans, widows, or someone in the midst of a severe personal economic downturn, there will always be those who are experiencing true need; and as such we have opportunity to exercise Christ-like compassion (cf. Deuteronomy 15:11, Matthew 26:11, Matthew 9:36).

But does that mean government is the conduit through which God wants benevolence to be carried out? The Biblical answer has been, and always will be, “no.”

Let’s consider five points that provide—via God’s Word—an orderly approach to Biblical giving.

NOT Your Minimum

When it comes to giving, give your first and best—never your minimum. Do not take God to the bottom line and ask Him how much you have to give in order to be a “member in good standing.” Do not think, “I wonder how much I really **have** to give now so I can be in Heaven later.” Do not think, even for a minute, that you can live better off 100% of your income than you can off 90% or less.

God wants what’s best for the crown of His Creation—us! (Jeremiah 29:11). He gave His very best in order that we might be saved in eternity—literally sparing no expense (John 3:16). He has prepared the best for us in eternity including “furnishings” that John could best describe as appearing like gold, pearl, and precious stones (Revelation 21:14-21).

If we pattern our giving after God (and He both expects and deserves our interest in excelling in this grace), we will never be interested in just getting by. Instead of always thinking how we expand our personal empires with more, bigger, and better (à la the Rich Fool), we will

look for and follow through on ways and means to give more, bigger, and better to fund God's causes throughout the world. He has always wanted our first and best (Proverbs 3:9).

NOT a Tax

When it comes to giving, do not give because you are supposed to. You read that right. If your motivation for giving stems from roots of grudging obligation or taxing duty, put your checkbook, cash, or credit card away. God does not invoke, nor has He ever invoked, a 10% (or greater) tax on His people. Understand: God wants us to give voluntarily, cheerfully, and sacrificially. This is how God wants us to give because **a**). we're giving back what is already His (1 Chronicles 29:11-16), **b**). He does not need our gifts for His benefit (Psalm 50:9-13), **c**). it is the love of Christ that is compelling us to give (2 Corinthians 5:14), and **d**). when we give because we want to, it is for our ultimate good (Proverbs 22:9) and His ultimate glory (Matthew 5:16).

NOT at All

Regarding our giving—especially monetarily—there are times when we are doing right by not giving at all. This is a particularly difficult concept to grasp for many who are fixated only on the verses that teach us that we are to give to the poor and needy. When we pray for God to “guide, guard, and direct us,” I wonder if He ever wants to shout, “I have been and I do!” When we look to the Bible to guide, guard, and direct our steps, we are taking not just the passages we like or know by heart, but the whole—the sum total—of His instructions. Psalm 119:160 reads, “The sum of your word is truth, and every one of your righteous rules endures forever” (ESV).

As such, along with the passages to give, we will provide equal time to the verses that condemn laziness, slothfulness, and indolence:

- The desire of the sluggard kills him, for his hands refuse to labor. (Proverbs 21:25)
- I passed by the field of a sluggard, by the vineyard of a man lacking sense, and behold, it was all overgrown with thorns; the ground was covered with nettles, and its stone wall was broken down. Then I saw and considered it; I looked and received instruction. A little sleep, a little slumber, a little folding of the hands to rest, and poverty will come upon you like a robber, and want like an armed man. (Proverbs 24:30-34)
- Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us. For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you, nor did we eat anyone's bread without paying for it, but with toil and labor we worked night and day, that we might not be a burden to any of you. It was not because we do not have that right, but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate. For even when we were with you, we would give you this command: If anyone is not willing to work, let him not eat. (2 Thessalonians 3:6-10)

God's laws are true for everyone. Just like sowing a particular seed will eventually lead to reaping a specific harvest, so too, lack of work **will** lead to poverty. Likewise, drunkenness, drug abuse, and general laziness will also result in lack—not bounty. That's why it is perfectly reasonable to echo (and paraphrase) Paul's inspired words, "If one is not willing to work, he has no business eating."

Noted philanthropist Andrew Carnegie said, "In bestowing charity the main consideration should be to help those who will help themselves... He is the only true reformer who is as

Careful and as anxious not to aid the unworthy as he is to aid the worthy, and perhaps, even more so, for in alms-giving more injury is probably done by rewarding vice than by relieving virtue.” Put another way, the New Orleans Charity Organization Society said, “Well-meant interference, unaccompanied by personal knowledge of all the circumstances, often does more harm than good and becomes a temptation rather than a help.”

There are times when it is both right and good to tell someone “no.” If you suspect that you will be in any way subsidizing bad behavior by giving to someone who has approached you asking for alms, you would do him a favor by saying no.

Discernment Is Key

When it comes to giving, we need to use the intellect that God has given to us. We must be “fruit inspectors” and examine the fruits of those to whom we are contributing. When approached on the street by someone who is apparently in a worse financial situation than we are, it is both right and good to question whether or not this person is a professional alms-taker (scam artist) or a legitimate person in need. If this individual wants money, ask a few questions to try to determine legitimate need. If the sign says “in need of food,” attempt to provide the specific need (food) rather than taking the easy route of pitching in a buck or two.

It is clear from Scripture that we are to help the truly poor and needy. In the Old Testament, we can read of commandments and examples of ways the Israelites were to help those in need. To fulfill the type of giving God wanted, part of the responsibility lay at the feet of those who had the ability to give and **part of the responsibility lay at the feet of the needy**. In Leviticus 19:9-12, 23:22, and Ruth 2:2-3, 17-18, we read how, at harvest time, the land-owners were to leave grain in the corners of the fields for those who were in need. Having done that, those in need were then to work by harvesting the corners. Is that person on the corner who “will

work for food” **really** willing to work? It is right and good to discern whether or not that is the case.

It is past time for people to understand the divine admonition to take responsibility for providing for one’s self and family (2 Thessalonians 3:10). If he finds himself unable to provide (not unwilling), friends and family are to step into the gap (1 Timothy 5:8, Proverbs 27:10). And finally, if no remedy can come from the aforementioned parties, the Church must stand at the ready (1 Corinthians 16:1-3, Acts 6:1-7). Through it all, we must once again claim God’s Truth promoting personal responsibility and accountability.

1 John 3:16-18 is a passage that uses bold words to remind us of our duty to help those in need. Tucked away in the passage we see discernment at work. Verse 17 reads, “But whoever has this world’s goods, and sees his **brother** in need, and shuts up his heart from him, how does the love of God abide in him?” (emp. added). Key elements of the verse include the ability to help, the responsibility to help, and the discernment necessary before helping. The command is to help a brother. As a brother, one should know the situation well. If there is true need, it is our duty to help—in fact, if we claim to know the love of God, our help will be free flowing. Accordingly, we also need to resist the urge to become cynical, remain vigilantly compassionate, but always exercise discernment in our giving.

Embrace Reckless Abandon

There are instances when we can, with reckless abandon, major in the grace of giving. We can be overachievers like the churches of Macedonia that we read about in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9.

When it comes to giving to support the efforts of our local congregation missionaries, widows and orphans, and efforts to proclaim the Truth in the marketplace of ideas, God wants our giving to be voluntary, cheerful, and liberal. Knowing that we are providing the means that will benefit others (Matthew 25:31-46), take the Gospel into all the world, and open doors that would've otherwise remained closed, all in a risk-free transaction (Malachi 3:10) that will accrue eternal rewards to our accounts (Philippians 4:15-19), what have we got to lose? Nothing other than any inhibition keeping us from achieving the giving God wants.