

To Tithe or NOT to Tithe: The Search for Truth, Part 5

In the previous episode, we considered the uproarious implications of following the letter of the law and how Paul's selfless service gets twisted into the expectation for a full time salary for preaching. In this episode, we'll look at two more desperate attempts to justify the tithe.

Rebuke of the Scribes and Pharisees Argument

Jesus rebuked the Scribes and Pharisees for meticulously tithing from their small plantings of "mint, dill and cumin", while neglecting more important matters of the law. Jesus said "these ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other undone" (KJV) and elsewhere "You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former" (NIV) – Matthew 23:23

Jesus' choice of words here is less direct and in the past tense as you would expect from someone who understood that the Law was about to be superseded by the new covenant. Strong's Dictionary for the Greek word "poieo" (G4160) says it's a "less direct" form of a command – which is why it's translated "ought to" or "should have". Contrast that with what Jesus said to the woman caught in adultery: "Go and sin no more" (KJV) and elsewhere "Go now and leave your life of sin" (NIV) – John 8:11. His words to her are direct, emphatic, and in the future tense – because there is an ongoing command against adultery unlike the Law to tithe which ceased to apply with the new priesthood in Christ.

The complete text of Matthew 23:23 reads: "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law—justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former."

As I was meditating on that scripture the Lord showed me something I hadn't seen before. In the statement "You give a tenth of your spices—mint, dill and cumin. But you have neglected the more important matters of the law", Jesus makes it clear that the "tithe" is a "matter of the law", by grouping the tithe with other "matters of the law". In effect Jesus said 'the law requires you to tithe, and practice justice, mercy, and faithfulness. While you have meticulously kept the law of the tithe, you have failed to keep the law concerning justice, mercy, and faithfulness'.

Jesus' clear identification of the "tithe" as a requirement of the law, dispenses with the "tithe" as applicable to Christians in as much as Jesus fulfilled the law (Matthew 5:17). Further, since we are IN Christ Jesus, and Christ Jesus is IN us, we too have fulfilled the law (Colossians 2:8-23).

The "Suburbs" of the Levites Objection

A brother in the Lord wrote with a question about the pastures God gave to the Levite priests. His pastor suggested that the Levite priests DID in fact raise their own flocks and herds and therefore were obligated to tithe. As proof, Numbers 35:4-5 were cited in which the Levites were given a portion of land around each of their 48 cities in Canaan. The pastor suggested my brother was still required to tithe based on the text. Let's have a listen to Numbers 35:4-5:

And the suburbs of the cities, which ye shall give unto the Levites, shall reach from the wall of the city and outward a thousand cubits round about. (5) And ye shall measure from without the city on the east side two thousand cubits, and on the south side two thousand cubits, and on the west side two thousand

cubits, and on the north side two thousand cubits; and the city shall be in the midst: this shall be to them the suburbs of the cities.

After researching scripture, looking up Jewish history and architecture, researching animal husbandry information and some number crunching, I responded to the brother as follows:

There were 23,000 Levite men 1 month old and older (Numbers 26:62), when they crossed into Canaan, to take possession of the 48 cities God gave to them (Numbers 35:7, Joshua 21:1-42). That's about 480 men per city. Assuming most were married with children, 320 households and a total population of 2000 per city seems reasonable. I'll spare you the measurements, conversions and math that put my wife to sleep while proofreading and get to the bottom line. I figure the city dwelling area averaged 6 acres, the inner suburbs which were for barns, sheep pens and mangers, about 275 acres, and the outer suburbs for grazing animals and growing small crops, 1800 acres.

For a sanity check, I looked up some animal husbandry sites to see what the recommendations were for grazing land ... this is what one web site said:

"The common rule of thumb is that one acre of permanent pasture can support one animal unit (one cow or horse, six sheep or goats) through the grazing season. Pasture productivity can vary widely from that guideline. Lush improved pastures can provide grazing for 10-12 ewes with their lambs per acre. With aggressive rotation and substantial rests after each grazing cycle, pastures can support 6 cows or 36 sheep per acre on improved pastures. At the other end of the scale, a cow or horse would have trouble supporting itself on five or even ten acres of dry native grassland, and one sheep per acre is the rule for some sheep stations where that's the condition."

So, let's suppose half of the 1800 acres was for fruit and grain, and the other half for animals. Let's also say the Levites looked to their pastures to support the animals they owned without bringing in extra grain or hay to feed them. Keep in mind growing food and grazing is subject to the seasons. Canaan is a hot and arid climate, so I don't think it unreasonable to suppose there was just 1 animal per man there (480) up to an animal per acre (900) – unless they were to drive their animals into the pasture lands of the 11 tribes for feeding and breeding. God through Moses was so specific about the measurements of the suburbs of the Levites I can't imagine more than a few animals per household nor that they drove them into the adjacent lands to graze.

Consequently, I believe the limited land means the animals were not for food so much as they were for the Levite's annual sin and fellowship offering. In farming terms, 1800 acres for 2000 people is paltry! God literally boxed them in and made them dependent on the other 11 tribes for food. Certainly one or 2 animals would not have fed a family of 4 for a year. Realistically, if that amount of land had been sufficient to raise their own food, why did God tell the 11 tribes to bring a tithe to feed the Levites? Does God want FAT Levites? The 'suburbs' allowed them to be 'hobby farmers' at best.

If as I suspect, the land was for providing each Levite family to raise a lamb for their annual sin offering, then in fact, the Levites gave not 10% but 100% in offering. Lastly, where scripture clearly says that the tithe was GIVEN to the Levites (Numbers 18:26, Hebrews 7:5), if the Levites did tithe from the food they produced, they received it back when the tithe was distributed to them. That is the standard Jesus followed when He received and then gave back to the people, the boys offering of 5 loaves and 2 fishes. That is the standard the church observed in Acts 2 and 4 when they received offerings and distributed them among the people according to their need. The Levite priesthood was a

picture – a foreshadow – of the priesthood of believers in Christ. What we give in offering, we receive back in the distribution because we are IN Christ, to Whom we give all.

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