

A Third

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Mal 3:8

(BHS)

הֲיִקָּבַע אָדָם אֱלֹהִים
כִּי אַתֶּם קִבַּעִים אֹתִי
וְאָמַרְתֶּם
בְּמָה קִבַּעְנוּךָ
הַמַּעֲשֵׂר וְהַתְּרוּמָה:

(NKJV)

Will a man **rob** God?
Yet you have **robbed** Me!
But you say,
'In what way have we **robbed** You?'
In tithes and **offerings**.

Note the **interrogative** that begins line 1 and makes it a question. “Tithe” means simply, “tenth.” The *terumah*, “offering,” indicates a contribution *above and beyond the simple tithe*. To withhold any, says the verse, is to rob God. What is claimed demands more material gifts to God than simply 10%.

Israel gave a tenth of their produce (plus 48 cities and surrounding farmland—what was that worth?) to the tribe of Levi (Num 18:21, Joshua 21). Another tithe was required to underwrite festivals (Deut 14:22 – 27). A third tithe was for the poor every third year (Deut 14:28 – 29). If you add these up, they come to over 23% of a landowner’s produce each year. In addition, Nehemiah imposed a Temple tax, the people provided items such as firewood to the priests, they gave God the first fruits, they ritually sacrificed much of their grain and livestock, and so on. The percentage in mind in our text (Mal 3:8) was *much* higher than a mere 10%. Perhaps a third might be closer to the mark. Maybe this is what the *whole* “tithe” means (v10).

I was alerted to the facts of the above paragraph in 2006 when I read two articles by Köstenberger and Croteau published in *BBR*. It is the clearest and most erudite treatment of the subject to my knowledge. Take a look at their first article [here](#). I *highly* recommend that you read it now, before we continue.

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A real paradigm-shifter, isn't it? I hope you can see what I am going on about now. It is simply not honest or defensible to use Mal 3:8 as a rule for the church, that the normative level of giving should be ten percent. Just stop preaching that. It isn't true.

I worked with a man named Kurt. He was a very big man. Not overweight, just built on a big frame. Quite muscular. We bought a special 400 pound chair for him. Every Monday morning when I reported to work as an engineer and saw him, I was astonished at how large he was. I developed a theory about the strange phenomenon of my repeated experience of surprise. My hypothesis is that his dimensions exceeded my brain's definition of a human being. I simply lacked the capacity to remember a person that big. Hence, every weekend he would shrink in my memory and I was shocked every Monday morning. He was bigger than I had the ability to remember.

A strange phenomenon happens when I give Köstenberger and Croteau's article to Presbyterians. It goes in one ear and out the other. They seem to forget it almost as soon as they read it. They discuss it with me immediately after, but very quickly forget what they learned and relapse into their pre-enlightened thinking.

And my students routinely don't "get it." It is as if they lack the capacity to think differently in this area. Their brains are so conditioned to think in terms of tithing that they can't conceive of any other pattern.

One question I sometimes get is, if we can't preach about tithing, then what will happen to Christian giving? What will become of our church budgets and so on?

The fact is, there is a big difference between *giving* and *tithing*. Christians are called to sacrificially give—but not to a certain specified percentage. The full-blown argument is developed by Köstenberger and Croteau's second article. Read it [here](#). Go on. More paradigm-shifting awaits.

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All Christians should give of their substance. But I think it is morally wrong to tell someone struggling on minimum wage that God wants 10% from them. On the other hand, it is also wrong to tell a wealthy person that a mere 10% fulfills their calling to give. Remember: the Old Testament sets the standard of a **third** of your gross income; otherwise you rob God. But in the age of the Spirit, it is not about a legal percentage.

Jesus fulfilled the whole law, *even the law of the tithe*. You don't have to keep trying to fulfill it! But if his Spirit lives in you, you will want to be like him in giving of yourself for others and for God. You will willingly suffer a reduced standard of living for him, in fact.

Please try to retain this information! Don't let your ingrained thinking push it out!