
Tithing— a Commandment Even for the Destitute

*Elder Lynn G. Robbins
Of the Seventy*



Lynn G. Robbins, "Tithing—a Commandment Even for the Destitute," *Ensign*, May 2005, 34

In Charles Dickens's timeless classic *A Christmas Carol*, Bob Cratchit hoped to spend Christmas Day with his family. " 'If quite *convenient*, Sir,' " he asked his employer, Mr. Scrooge.

" 'It's *not convenient*,' said Scrooge, 'and it's not fair. If I was to stop half-a-crown for it, you'd think yourself ill used.' ...

" 'And yet,' said Scrooge, 'you don't think *me* ill-used, when I pay a day's wages for no work.'

"The clerk observed that it was only once a year.

" 'A poor excuse for picking a man's pocket every twenty-fifth of December!' said Scrooge." [1](#)

For Scrooge—as with any selfish, or "natural," man—sacrifice is never *convenient*.

The natural man has a tendency to think only of himself—not only to place himself first, but rarely, if ever, to place anyone else second, including God. For the natural man, sacrifice does not come naturally. He has an insatiable appetite for more. His so-called needs seem to always outpace his income so that having "enough" is forever out of reach, just as it was for the miser Scrooge.

Because the natural man tends to hoard or consume everything, the Lord wisely commanded ancient Israel to sacrifice not the last and poorest of the flock, but the firstlings—not the leftovers of the field, but the firstfruits (see [Deut. 26:2](#); [Mosiah 2:3](#);

[Moses 5:5](#)). Genuine sacrifice has been a hallmark of the faithful from the beginning.

Among those who do *not* sacrifice there are two extremes: one is the rich, gluttonous man who won't and the other is the poor, destitute man who believes he can't. But how can you ask someone who is starving to eat less? *Is* there a level of poverty *so* low that sacrifice should not be expected or a family so destitute that paying tithing should cease to be required?

The Lord often teaches using extreme circumstances to illustrate a principle. The story of the widow of Zarephath is an example of extreme poverty used to teach the doctrine that mercy cannot rob sacrifice any more than it can rob justice. In fact, the **truer measure of sacrifice** isn't so much what one gives to sacrifice as what one sacrifices to give (see [Mark 12:43](#)). Faith isn't tested so much when the cupboard is full as when it is bare. In these defining moments, the crisis doesn't create one's character—it reveals it. The crisis is the test.

The widow of Zarephath lived in the days of the prophet Elijah, by whose word the Lord brought a drought upon the land for three and a half years (see [Luke 4:25](#)). The famine grew so severe that many were finally at the point of death. This is the circumstance in which we find the widow.

The Lord says to Elijah, “Arise, get thee to Zarephath . . . : behold, I have commanded a widow woman there to sustain thee” ([1 Kgs. 17:9](#)). It is interesting that Elijah is not told to go to Zarephath until the widow and her son are at the point of death. It is at this extreme moment—facing starvation—that her faith will be tested.

As he comes into the city he sees her gathering sticks.

“And he called to her, and said, Fetch me, I pray thee, a little water in a vessel, that I may drink.

“And as she was going to fetch it, he called to her, and said, Bring me, I pray thee, a morsel of bread in thine hand.

“And she said, As the Lord thy God liveth, I have not a cake, but an handful of meal in a barrel, and a little oil in a cruse: and, behold, I am gathering two sticks, that I may go in and dress it for me and my son, that we may eat it, and die” ([1 Kgs. 17:10–12](#)).

A *handful of meal* would be very little indeed, perhaps just enough for one serving, which makes Elijah's response intriguing. Listen: “And Elijah said unto her, Fear not; go and do as thou hast said: but make me thereof a little cake *first*” ([1 Kgs. 17:13](#); emphasis added).

Now doesn't that sound selfish, asking not just for the first piece, but possibly the only piece? Didn't our parents teach us to let other people go first and especially for a gentleman to let a lady go first, let alone a starving widow? Her choice—does she eat, or

does she sacrifice her last meal and hasten death? Perhaps she will sacrifice her own food, but could she sacrifice the food meant for her starving son?

Elijah understood the doctrine that blessings come *after* the trial of our faith (see [Ether 12:6](#); [D&C 132:5](#)). He wasn't being selfish. As the Lord's servant, Elijah was there to give, not to take. Continuing from the narrative:

“But make me thereof a little cake *first* [the firstlings], and bring it unto me, and *after* make for thee and for thy son.

“For thus saith the Lord God of Israel, The barrel of meal shall not waste, neither shall the cruse of oil fail, until the day that the Lord sendeth rain upon the earth.

“And she went and did according to the saying of Elijah: and she, and he, and her house, did eat many days.

“And the barrel of meal wasted not, neither did the cruse of oil fail, according to the word of the Lord, which he spake by Elijah” ([1 Kgs. 17:13–16](#); emphasis added).

One reason the Lord illustrates doctrines with the most extreme circumstances is to eliminate excuses. If the Lord expects even the poorest widow to pay her mite, where does that leave all others who find that it is not *convenient* or easy to sacrifice?

No bishop, no missionary should ever hesitate or lack the faith to teach the law of tithing to the poor. The sentiment of “They can't *afford* to” needs to be replaced with “They can't afford *not* to.”

One of the first things a bishop *must* do to help the needy is ask them to pay their tithing. Like the widow, if a destitute family is faced with the decision of paying their tithing or eating, they should pay their tithing. The bishop can help them with their food and other basic needs until they become self-reliant.

In October of 1998 Hurricane Mitch devastated many parts of Central America. President Gordon B. Hinckley was very concerned for the victims of this disaster, many of whom lost everything—food, clothing, and household goods. He visited the Saints in the cities of San Pedro Sula and Tegucigalpa, Honduras; and Managua, Nicaragua. And like the words of the loving prophet Elijah to a starving widow, this modern prophet's message in each city was similar—to sacrifice and be obedient to the law of tithing.

But how can you ask someone so destitute to sacrifice? President Hinckley knew that the food and clothing shipments they received would help them survive the crisis, but his concern and love for them went far beyond that. As important as humanitarian aid is, he knew that the most important assistance comes from God, not from man. The prophet wanted to help them unlock the windows of heaven as promised by the Lord in the book of Malachi (see [Mal. 3:10](#); [Mosiah 2:24](#)).

President Hinckley taught them that if they would pay their tithing, they would always have food on their tables, they would always have clothing on their backs, and they would always have a roof over their heads.

When serving a meal, it is much easier to set one more plate at the beginning of the meal than it is to find food for a latecomer once the meal is over and the food has been served. Likewise, isn't it actually easier to give the Lord the firstlings or the firstfruits than it is to hope that there are sufficient "leftovers" for Him? As the founder of our feast, shouldn't *He* be the guest of honor, the first to be served?

My loving mother, Evelyn Robbins, taught me the law of tithing when I was four years old. She gave me an empty Band-Aid box, the tin kind with a snapping lid. She taught me to keep my tithing pennies in it and then take it to the bishop. I am eternally grateful for her, for that Band-Aid box, and for the blessings that have come from paying tithing.

In *A Christmas Carol*, Mr. Scrooge changed his ways—he was not the man he had been. Likewise, this is the gospel of repentance. If the Spirit is prompting us to more fully obey the law of sacrifice in our life, may we begin making that change today.

I am so grateful for the Savior, who was the perfect example of obedience through sacrifice—who offered "himself a sacrifice for sin" and became, in Lehi's words, "the *firstfruits* unto God" ([2 Ne. 2:7, 9](#); emphasis added). I bear witness of Him and of these, His doctrines, in the name of Jesus Christ, amen.

Gospel topics: blessings, faith, sacrifice, tithing

Note

1. *The Annotated Christmas Carol*, ed. Michael Patrick Hearn (1976), 69; emphasis added.

© 2005 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved.

© 2005 Intellectual Reserve, Inc. All rights reserved. [Rights and use information.](#) [Privacy policy](#)