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Gold and Silver Series.]

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PROPORTIONATE GIVING.

BY

REV. WILLIAM ARTHUR, A.M.



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PROPORTIONATE GIVING.

WHEN we speak of the duty of giving away a stated proportion of our income, we do not mean *that all persons having equal incomes are bound to give away equal sums, however their other circumstances may vary.* Power to give away may be modified by three circumstances—family, locality, and station. Of two persons, each receiving five hundred dollars a year, one has seven children, the other is a bachelor. It would be strange if the single man might justly spend upon himself as much as the other must spend on his family, or that he might innocently give away more than the other can contrive to get. Of two persons having the same family and the same income, one lives in a large city, where rent, taxes, and provisions are dear; the other in an agricultural village, where these are all cheap. Is the latter to

take the full advantage of his easier circumstances for his private purse and give none of it to benevolence?

Nor do we mean that all persons are to give away the same proportion of their income, however its gross amount may vary. Two brothers live in the same town, and have the same family. In this case station, locality, and family are equal. The elder is just able to provide his children with a small house, frugal fare, homely clothing, and a passable education. He is quite unable to lay up any thing which would help to open their way in life when the critical period of settlement shall come. Yet, knowing to whom he and his owe their daily bread, he gratefully devotes a tenth of his income to the service of God.

His younger brother has been otherwise prospered. His children sleep in spacious rooms, and play among their own flower-beds; their clothing is rich, their board generous, and their education costly. For each of them he is able to lay up in store, and

says that, if they do not pass through life in comfort and respect, it will be their own fault. And is this man, for whom Providence has done so much more than for his brother, to content himself with rendering the same proportionate acknowledgment as he? For the latter to give a tenth of all is an effort—an effort which he feels, and his children feel, in “their coats, their hosen, and their hats.” For the other to give a tenth would be no effort whatever; it would never affect his comforts, not even his luxuries, no, not the crumbs that fall from his table. It would affect nothing but his hoarded money.

Take another case. You visit a friend when he is twenty-five years of age, spending little on his establishment, and giving away a tenth to Him who gives him all. You return to his house when he is fifty. Now he is spending on his establishment ten times as much as before. Why? Because the Lord “hath blessed the work of his hands, and his substance is increased in the land.” The same labor which, twenty-five years ago,

yielded a modest income, now brings a twentyfold return. While Providence has thus multiplied the proportionate productiveness of his toil, is he to confine his acknowledgments to the same proportion which he rendered when his efforts were far less fruitful?

On the other hand, we do not mean that persons are bound to give away all their income, so as to admit of no increase of capital or extension of property. There is a large class of promises which attach temporal advancement to humble and godly industry, as a reward from Providence.

So far from that accumulation of capital which results from the blessing of Providence on lawful industry contravening the purposes of benevolence, it directly and most efficiently serves them.

A class of promises exists which must be nullified, if no servant of God is to permit his possessions to increase; and such commands as, "Provide things honest in the sight of all men;" "Charge them that are rich . . . that they be ready to distribute, willing to com-

municate," etc., enforce duties which exist not if no man has a right to have possessions except only in such a degree as will enable him to continue alive. No command ever contradicts another command; and no command is ever meant to supersede a whole class of promises.

We do not mean that Christians are bound to draw a line, and say, "Beyond this limit, no matter what the bounties of Providence may be, my possessions shall never go." Happy would it be for many did they set a limit to their aims, and add nothing beyond! Whenever this is done in the spirit of humble faith, surely it is good and acceptable to God. But I cannot undertake to teach that it is laid down in Scripture as an incumbent duty.

Continually and liberally offer unto God; bountifully and actively distribute to man; and so long as we see you so doing, "may your garners be full, affording all manner of store!" I, at least, will cheerfully leave it to Providence to fix the limit of your increase. But one word: as you proceed

upward, one earnest word: walk warily on those heights! Heads are often turned up there; and there are fearful gulfs if you fall!

While, however, we do not contend that to let "riches increase" is forbidden, or even that to permit that increase to an indefinite amount is contrary to clear Scripture, we do contend:

That not to give any part of our income is unlawful.

That to leave what we shall give to be determined by impulse or chance, without any principle to guide us, is unlawful.

That to fix a principle for our guidance, by our own disposition, or by prevalent usage, without seeking light in the word of God, is unlawful.

That when we search the Scriptures for a principle, the very lowest proportion of our income for which we can find any show of justification is a tenth of the whole.

That, therefore, it is our duty to give away statedly, for the service and honor of

our God, at the very least one tenth of all which he commits to our stewardship.

AS TO THE GROUNDS ON WHICH THIS DUTY RESTS. Let us suppose that it does not rest on any grounds whatever ; that the idea of such a duty is without foundation ; that we are each at liberty to choose what proportion of his possessions he shall give away, from the nearest approach to nothing upward ; so that if one give a tenth, another a ninetieth, and another one thousandth part, they differ not in this—that one is liberal, the other covetous, and the third a wretch ; but in this—that one is liberal, the other less liberal, and the other less so still ; each of them practicing a virtue, a voluntary virtue, only in various degrees. This is the plain meaning and practical application of a notion which floats in the undefined thought, and is often expressed in vague language by many excellent people—a notion about Christianity leaving the amount of liberality to the private will and disposition of each individual.

If that view be correct, then it follows that in Christian morals we have one virtue which has no *minimum* limit, no expiring point, which continues to be a virtue down to within a hairbreadth of nothing, no matter how largely mixed with the opposite vice. Shall we apply this principle to the other virtues? For instance, truth or honesty? Surely there is some point far short of nothing, at which gifts cease to be "liberal," and begin to be "vile;" at which a giver ceases to be "bountiful," and deserves to be called a "churl!"

If Christianity has left benevolence entirely to private decision, it also follows *that, while those branches of expenditure which regard our self-interest are regulated by fixed circumstances, that which is for the glory of God is at the mercy of chance.* The three circumstances already named—family, locality, station—decide for each of us, to a great extent, the scale of many items of our outlay. Your rent is tolerably well fixed from year to year, your board is not very uncertain,

your dress, and every other claim of self-interest, has its proportion not ill-defined; and it is probable that while every outlay that nourishes self is regular, that only outlay which tends to free you from earth, and connect your hopes with a better country, is precisely the one which the religion of Jesus has left to be the foot-ball of passion or of accident.

Suppose that a Christian, without offending against his religion, may spend on self-interests more than nine tenths of his income; then it follows that *it is lawful for a Christian to be more selfish than was lawful for a Jew.* This conclusion may not be agreeable; but it is clear. Every Jew was blessed with a religion which checked his downward, earthward tendency at the *very least* to this extent—that one tenth went to sacred things, and thus connected with them his affections and his hopes. Less than that he could not consecrate to the service of his God without a trespass against his religion. If, then, a Christian may give less, his religion elevates him in a lower

degree, leaves him to be more earthly without guilt, and less noble without reproach.

One other consequence follows. If a Christian may, according to his religion, lawfully devote less than a tenth of his income to holy purposes, then CHRISTIANITY HAS LOWERED THE STANDARD OF A VIRTUE, and that the virtue of liberality! The Jew who gave less than one tenth was branded by his religion a sinner. That system, which we regard as so much more earthly, so much less spiritual and heavenly than ours, ever held the standard of pecuniary self-denial up to that point at the very least.

But I will not further follow the supposition that the duty of giving away at least a tenth of our income has no grounds; for the conclusions to which it leads are not satisfactory. I will now assert that it has grounds. They may be thus stated :

Giving is an essential part of the Christian religion. In support of this position the whole New Testament cries aloud. The

system of redemption is, from first to last, one prodigious process of giving. God loved the world, and GAVE his only begotten Son. The Son loved us, and GAVE himself to death for us all. This giving does not rest at the point of bounty, but passes on to that of inconceivable sacrifice. Every man on whose spirit the true light of redemption breaks, finds himself heir to a heritage of givings which began on the eve of time, and will keep pace with the course of eternity.

Giving is ordained by Christianity to be both bountiful and cheerful. It does not satisfy the demands of our religion that we give; we must give much. The twofold requirement is a gift not *sparing* as to amount, nor *grudging* as to feeling. One may cheerfully give a sparing gift who would grudge a bountiful one; and one who, from "necessity," from pressure, or shame, gives a large gift, may grudge while he gives. Do not spare when you give, and do not grudge when you make sacrifices!

It is ordained by Christianity that our bountiful and cheerful giving shall be in proportion to our means. “Upon the first day of the week let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him.” Here the scale which regulates giving is decisively taken from the hand of impulse, chance, or personal disposition. The principle of proportion is enjoined in the New Testament. But the passage decides nothing as to what application of the law of proportion is to be made. One who gives a hundredth part of his increase, observes a proportion as much as one who gives a fifth.

What is giving in proportion to God's gift to us? If we seek an answer in the New Testament, every thing seems to push up the scale to a proportion from which we nearly all shrink away. We find liberality in a rich man sanctioned up to “half his goods,” as in the case of Zaccheus; and in a poor widow up to “all her living,” as with the two mites. We find a whole Church selling their property, and giving away without limit; and

though that example is never enforced on others, it is never reprov'd. We find the Church of Macedonia in "depths of poverty," and also in "a great trial of afflictions," abounding in "riches of liberality;" and their record is written for the gratitude of all ages, that they gave "beyond their power." And these early Christians, who thus rejoiced to bestow, are melted to yet greater sacrifices by words so winning and so mighty as, "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."

Turn where you will in the New Testament in search of an answer to the question, "What is giving as God has prospered me?" you are surrounded by an atmosphere of fervid joy and love; you are invaded by a feeling of which the words are "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good-will to men," and the deeds are every good work, distributing, communicating, making sacrifices with which God is well pleased; you

are stimulated by examples of apostles forsaking all, individuals selling all, Churches bestowing all, the deeply poor giving to the poorer, and, to crown the whole, the MASTER giving always, and storing never, and then giving himself a ransom for all. You feel that if you are to take your answer to the question by honest, logical inference from that book, any thought of a tenth is out of sight, and you must contemplate a style of giving which no one I know—perhaps I do know some of the poor who would—but which no one of the comfortable classes, in our day, would think of following.

If, fearful to press New Testament precept and example, we go to the Old to learn what the Lord counted acceptable in ancient times, we find that each head of a family among the Jews was bound by direct enactment to give a tenth of all his yearly increase to the support of the ministering tribe of Levi; besides, he had to pay a second tenth for the support of the feasts; a third tenth for the poor was given once in three years;

and in addition were the trespass-offerings, long and costly journeys to the temple, and sundry other religious charges, all imposed by Divine sanction; besides free-will offerings. Taking these separate items, it is undoubted that among the Jews *every head of a family was under religious obligation to give away at least a fifth, perhaps a third, of his yearly income.*

Passing on to the patriarchs, you find Jacob, when houseless, awaking from his sleep by the road-side, solemnly vowing to the God of his fathers, that if only "bread to eat and raiment to put on" were granted to him in his exile, a tenth of all should be rendered back in honor of his God. And further up, where you see Abraham, the father and representative of all believers, standing before Melchizedek, the type, not of the Levitical priesthood, but of our great High-Priest, he gives him a tenth of all, though the goods were the property of others, which he would not, for his private benefit, take "from a thread to a shoe latchet;"

but yet he asserted the claims of the Lord upon all.

Thus, in the patriarchal dispensation, a tenth seems to be the recognized portion which the Lord accepts. In the Mosaic dispensation, by express ordinances, that proportion is raised to at least a fifth ; and when we come into the Gospel dispensation we are sensible at once of a notable rise in the temperature of benevolence. Here the idea of a religion less generous, less self-denying, less indifferent to sordid hoards or personal comforts, is not only inadmissible, but atrocious. Whatever of heavenliness and large heart was in the religion of prophets, receives an expansion and not a chill, and selfish man is placed at last in his highest school of unselfishness.

But several objections are taken against our conclusion, some of which we ought to notice.

“In urging upon us to give away a tenth, you are reviving the Levitical law, and that is abolished.” We need not pause to show that, quite independently of the Levitical tenth, the other requirements of the Mosaic law demand

more than a second tenth ; and that the patriarchs gave their tenth before Levi was.

“But we are not now to be brought under rule ; for the law is love.” I know that some who thus speak do so upon the best grounds. A good man has a small income and a large family ; he has also a warm heart, and his neighbors know it. Though he never adopted any specific proportion, he is conscious, and so is his wife, by daily experience, that he gives away “to his power, yea, and beyond his power.” When he hears of forming a rule, and walking by it, he feels that for him it is unnecessary ; and he pleads, “The law is love.”

Love may be a good reason for going above rules ; but it is the worst in the world for staying below them, or without them. It is a law of love which binds a man to provide for the comfort of his family ; but surely there is no reason why he should refuse to give his wife a regular allowance for the expenses of housekeeping.

“But you speak of giving a tenth—that is

an arithmetical law; and you will never bring the hearts of Christians under a cold arithmetical law." But is the principle less sacred for that? "Remember the *seventh* day to keep it holy." That is arithmetical! But is there any thing less hallowed in the Sabbath because that arithmetical proportion is to be consecrated to God? Again, it is ordained that a bishop shall be the husband of but *one* wife, which is an arithmetical law.

If you do not give a tenth, but a ninetieth, even that is an arithmetical proportion; and if, instead of giving a tenth all the year through, you only give a tenth of one day's income for the whole year, still that is an arithmetical proportion—though it might be hard to ascertain it: and, in fact, go down, however low you may, if you give any thing whatever, at any time whatever, it still bears an arithmetical proportion to the whole.

"But if you teach men to give a tenth, they will give that and be content, though they ought to be giving much more." But how do matters stand at present? Multitudes of

sincere Christians are royally content, though they give nothing like a tenth ; and could we succeed in bringing up the Church generally to that proportion, (though far below what we hold to be the due of many,) the state of things then would present a wonderful improvement on that existing now.

But I question whether adopting the principle of proportion would tend to make men content with the *minimum* proportion, after they were abundantly prospered. So far as my knowledge of its practical working goes, my impression is the reverse. It is my pleasure to know many men who, at the outset of life, or early in life, adopted Jacob's resolution to give a tenth. These have all been prosperous men. I do not know one of them but shows that the effect of his early adopting the principle of a tenth, has been to prepare him for a higher proportion when years of plenty set in.

And is it not natural that such should be the effect? There is a great, not to say a tremendous, power over man in that very

principle of arithmetical proportion which it is so easy to spurn. When an arbitrary proportion of our time or goods is taken—a proportion for which reason has no more to say than for any other—what is the effect upon the mind? It serves as a practical claim of sovereignty on the part of the Creator. It says, “This is claimed, because all might be claimed. He who accepts this, owns all, and holds you to account for the rest.” It is not probable that year after year one will carefully set apart a fixed proportion for the service of his God, without becoming habituated to feel that he is neither author nor owner of any fraction of property, but merely steward; and that he at whose feet he lays the first-fruits is the Lord the giver of all.

“*But we ought not to speak of a tenth, a fifth, or any other proportion; our duty as Christians is to give all.*” That is not correct. Our duty is not to give away all; but to employ all according to the will of God, and so as to be pleasing in his sight. It is

our positive duty not to give away all; but to spend suitable proportions of our income in supplying our own wants, and those of our families, as also in fulfilling any commercial or other calling for which property is needful. Our objector replies, "Of course, what I meant was, all *after our reasonable wants are supplied*. We ought to give absolutely all the surplus, and not save any."

In the lips of some—and I could name the very man—this means noble and incessant liberality; but in the lips of most it would just mean giving as much as was perfectly convenient. If every one, before assigning any portion as a thank-offering to the Giver of all, is to spend what meets his views of providing for his own and his children's wants, present and prospective, in ninety-nine out of every hundred cases it will prove that the surplus for giving away is next to nothing. In many cases, giving liberally will be postponed till family provision is made, and resources are fairly in advance of demands; and by that time *all heart for giving will be*

gone. In fact, this rule of giving all you have to spare is that by which multitudes think they are living; whereas, could they get an account of all they gave on this system last year, and resolve next year to consecrate the small proportion of a tenth, they would be utterly astonished to find how much the latter exceeds their habitual liberality.

Another advantage of deciding that a consecrated proportion shall take the precedence of all other outlay, instead of counting on giving what we have to spare, is this: It materially affects our scale of personal expenditure. Our ideas of what is necessary are ruled by our knowledge of what we have to spend. A gentleman with five hundred a year, who means to give away what he can spare, unless he be a man of extraordinary generosity and decision united, forms his whole scheme of expenditure on the basis of five hundred a year, and finds it hard, now and then, to spare a pound or two; not that he is unwilling, but that all his resources are pre-engaged. Another with the same income

has his regular "benevolent fund," into which the first fifth of his income goes. The effect is, that all his plans of expenditure proceed on the basis of four hundred a year; and thus while the benevolent fund is strong for all legitimate claims, it pays itself—perhaps more than pays itself—by acting as a check upon the funds laid aside for pleasure trips and diversions, and several other exigent funds on which millions of our domestic revenues are wasted. We, then, hesitate not for a moment to prefer the rule of giving regular first-fruits, even in the low proportion of a tenth, over the rule of giving *all* we have to spare. This last, while for a strong and holy man the highest of laws, is for the great majority a law which amounts to no more than is now prevalent.

"But, at all events, surely you would not apply your rule to the poor?" Certainly not to the destitute. One object of liberality is to relieve and comfort them. But, rising above those who need help, upon whom do you fix as poor? The man who can afford to

spend money on whisky or tobacco, is he poor? The woman who can afford to spend money on fineries, is she poor? It would be no small blessing if some of those well-meaning but ill-judging persons, who are continually telling the poor that they are too poor to do any good, or support any cause, would stand out of the way of the poor. The worst thing you can do for a man is to pauperize him.

On the very same grounds that it is a serious injury to a man to pauperize him, it is a great service to teach him to save something, and give it away. The one induces feebleness, the other power; the one inclines him to be listless in earning and thriftless in spending, the other to be hopeful in earning and careful in spending. The moment a man begins to save something and give it away, he rises in the social scale, and takes his place in the family circle of useful men.

There was One who was no amateur in poverty, but had known it from the manger, in his own lot and that of his friends. Did

he think it a pity that the widow should give away her two mites? or did he tell Mary that the exceedingly costly box of ointment was too much for one of her means? And when the prophet heard from the widow of whom he begged a little bread, that she was so poor as to say, "I have not a cake," did he think it would be a loss to her to give, for the Lord's sake, a little of her meal? He who delights in mercy has never yet denied to the poor the joy of giving. The apostle Paul plainly contemplates giving as the immediate result of labor in the case of one recovered from the class of thieves. "Let him that stole steal no more; but rather let him labor, working with his own hands the thing that is good, *that he may give to him that needeth.*" Eph. iv, 28. If, then, a reformed thief, just beginning to earn his own bread, is at once to set before him the joy of giving away a share of his earnings, who dare degrade the working-men of Christendom, by telling them they are to look on themselves as meant only to feed their own wants?

“But there are those whom we do not call the poor, who yet are in more straits than they—persons of small means and respectable position.” I should be the last man on earth to press hard on that class; nor are there any sorrows I would hold more sacred than theirs, who unite in themselves the feelings of the rich and the fortunes of the poor. Poverty is a cold wind; and the higher your situation the colder it blows. But this is to be said: However sacred may be the claims of respectability, of the desire to honor your family, and maintain your appearances, more sacred still are the claims of gratitude, piety, and goodness. Nor will it ever prove that what you painfully spare from your own respectability for the purpose of honoring your God, will fail to bring back its reward. *“Them that honor me, I will honor.”*