

Do We Still Believe in Sister Betsy?

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Suggested Scripture Reading - Matthew 6:19-21

(Show pictures of early SDA pioneers and ask congregation to try to identify. Then identify them yourself.)

(PP) William Miller

(PP) James White

(PP) Joseph Bates

(PP) Ellen White

(PP - Show empty picture frame)

There are no known pictures of Sister Betsy, yet she was immensely important in the success of the early Adventist church. She was a household name at a very difficult time in the developing church.

(PP - Group picture of SDA pioneers)

A crisis existed in the Adventist ministry in the 1850s. The question was how to support the ministers who were preaching the Advent message.

(PP - J. N. Andrews with family)

In 1856, J. N. Andrews left preaching to work as a clerk in his uncle's store. He had a wife and two children and he simply did not make enough money to support his family.

(PP - J. N. Loughborough)

Around this same time, John Loughborough also left pastoral ministry for the same reason.

The fledgling denomination simply could not pay a regular salary that would support a family. Usually, the preacher's "pay" was at the discretion of the congregation he was visiting that day. Often, the "pay" consisted of a bushel of wheat, a half a hog, or a piece of broiled fish and a honeycomb.

(PP - Battle Creek Tabernacle)

It was a concern to Ellen White. She told James that the Bible *must* contain the answer. So, in 1858, the Battle Creek church began to systematically study Scripture to find a Biblical plan for the support of the ministry. They developed a plan. This is where Sister Betsy came in.

The principle was this: Each member should systematically give offerings to pay those who were preaching the truth.

(PP - 1 Corinthians 9:13-14)

They found a number of principles to apply to the problem. In 1 Corinthians 9:13-14, they discovered that those who preach the Gospel should receive their living from the Gospel.

(PP - 1 Corinthians 16:2)

From 1 Corinthians 16:2 they learned that it should be systematic: planned in advance.

(PP - Systematic Benevolence - Explanation of plan below)

The original plan may surprise you.

- Men between the ages of 18-60 were asked to give 5 - 25 cents per week.
- Women were asked to give 2 - 10 cents per week.
- In addition, they were asked to give 1 - 5 cents per week for every \$100 of their net worth.

They called this plan Systematic Benevolence; SB for short. But the plan grew to be called by an affectionate nickname: Sister Betsy.

(PP - James & Ellen White)

When they adopted this plan to finance the ministry of the church, James White estimated that if every member would participate, they would have more than \$5,000 each year—a *whopping* sum of money in those days. Ellen White endorsed the plan.

(PP - Tithe and offerings graphic)

They continued to study the Bible for the next 20 years and finally developed the system of tithe and offerings that we have today.

(PP - Adventist Giving)

Statistically, Seventh-day Adventists contribute more to the Lord's work through the church than any other religious group in the world. God has blessed our faithfulness!

But, do we still believe in Sister Betsy - systematic benevolence? Is systematic benevolence still relevant in 2017? Doesn't the church have lots of money? Why should I give them tithes and offerings?

(PP - Malachi Bible page)

When you ask most Seventh-day Adventists for a Biblical principle for tithe and offerings, the first one that usually comes from their mouth is from Malachi. Though many will not be able to give you the exact reference, most will know the principle.

(PP - Malachi 3:8-9)

Usually, we don't read the context of this text.

(PP - Malachi 3:6-7)

(PP - Return to me . . . God)

The people are estranged from God. So, God is calling His people to return to Him. One step in this process was to return tithe and give offerings. Yes, God takes the returning of tithe and the giving of offerings seriously.

Malachi 3 is an important text to teach us about tithe and offerings. But, frankly, it bothers me that for many people this is the primary text they think of and it shows a negative motivation.

(PP - Gun with barrel pointed towards you)

I don't return tithe and give offerings because I am afraid of the judgment of God because I'm robbing Him. I don't return tithe and give offerings because I am under duress. There is a positive reason I return tithe and give offerings. I'll come back to that later.

(PP - Picture of old country church)

Many years ago, I was pastor of a church out in the country in Indiana. We didn't print a bulletin each week so the service was less planned than most are today. Before the service started, the elders would gather in the back room and take a blank order of service and fill in who would do what for that particular day. The conversation went something like, "I did the offering call last week . . . you do it this week."

On this particular Sabbath, I preached on tithe and offerings. I like to cover all the doctrines on a two or three-year cycle, so this was my opportunity to remind them of what we believed. At the end of the sermon I announced the closing hymn. I recited the page number from memory. Bad idea! I announced that the closing hymn would be #482. (This was in the old *Church Hymnal*.)

When we turned there it was obviously the wrong hymn, but the piano was already playing so we went ahead and sang it. The title of the hymn was *The Judgment is Set*. Here are the words . . .

(PP - *The Judgment Is Set*)

*The judgment has set, the books have been opened;
How shall we stand in that great day,
When every thought, and word, and action,
God, the righteous Judge, shall weigh?*

*How shall we stand in that great day?
How shall we stand in that great day?
Shall we be found before him wanting?*

Or with our sins all washed away?

OOPS! Maybe I should have passed the offering plate again! Really! I don't believe this is the motivation for giving tithe and offerings.

Let's make sure we have our definitions right.

(PP - 10%)

Tithe = 10%. We know that because the Hebrew word itself *means* one-tenth.

(PP - Offerings)

Offerings are given in addition to tithe. It gives us an opportunity to show our generosity to God since no specific amount is specified. But we can find a principle in Deuteronomy 16:17.

(PP - Deuteronomy 16:17 & 1 Corinthians 16:2))

We give offerings based on how we think the Lord has blessed us. It takes a conscience devoted to God to make such decisions.

(PP - Tithe envelope front)

(PP - Tithe envelope back)

(Go through tithe envelope and explain various local needs in addition to tithe.)

Look at some other positive principles for returning tithe and offerings.

(PP - Malachi 3:10-11)

Returning tithe and giving offerings is a faith-building partnership. God promises to open the windows of heaven and pour out a blessing! (Does heaven have windows? I guess so! Let's make this the 29th fundamental belief!)

My mother was faithful in returning tithe and giving offerings. She used to have a saying: "You can't out give the Lord." She proved that in her own life. I have found it to be true in my own experience. God has given us many blessings!

Malachi also gives the promise that He will rebuke the devourer. This is especially written to an agricultural society, but also applies to us today. I personally can see how God has done this in my life and with my vehicles. I have three cars with over 400,000 miles and I have less car repairs than most people I know.

Caution . . . this is not a get rich scheme.

(PP - Matthew 23:23)

Some say tithing is only in the Old Testament, not in the New Testament. Didn't Jesus condemn tithing?

Jesus is condemning them for being so strict about their tithing while they were being so unkind and judgmental. Notice that his answer is that they should do BOTH! He is not condemning tithing. He was affirming it.

(PP - 2 Corinthians 9:6-7)

Notice a couple of ideas: we are encouraged to give from the heart and to be *cheerful* givers.

(PP - Cheerful giver)

There's an old saying that says "Give until it hurts." According to this text, we should "give until it feels good" because God loves a cheerful giver!

Notice also that it says we should give as we have decided in our heart. This is another text that seems to teach systematic benevolence.

Remember that we are not talking about consumerism. Tithe and offerings are not payment for services rendered.

(PP - 1 Corinthians 16:1-2)

(PP - Piggy bank)

Notice that giving should be systematic. Lay it aside at home on the first day of the week so it's there - ready to go - when Paul came.

It's *planned giving*! Planned so we can give as we have been prospered.

(PP - Matthew 6:33)

This text gives my rationale for returning tithe and giving offerings. It's a very positive reason.

Giving to God's work helps keep me from putting myself first. God doesn't need me to give offerings as much as *I* need me to give offerings. It helps me keep my priorities in the right order. It can help me from being selfish.

(PP - Matthew 6:19-21)

This text tells that where our treasure is, there is where our heart is. Vice-versa is also true: Where our heart is, there you'll put your treasure.

By being faithful in returning tithe and giving offerings to support the Lord's work, you show where your heart is. That's why I say that tithe and offerings is not a financial issue. It is a spiritual issue.

If you believe in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist church to take the Gospel to the world, you show it by returning tithe and giving offerings.

If you believe in the ministry of your local church to take the Gospel to your local community, you show it by supporting our church through your offerings. Most of those ministries can be supported by contributing to our local church budget.

I thank you for your faithfulness through the years, and I look forward to how we can continue to reach out to our community because of your faithfulness.

I encourage you to remain faithful. I challenge you to take a step up. There are some who only return tithe. Start giving offerings to our local church. You may start small at first, but you will grow by being in partnership with the Lord. It's faith building as you see how the Lord blesses you. It's progressive as your faith grows.

God does not ask us for great deeds. He asks us for faithfulness.

You've probably all seen the bumper sticker that says, "Honk if you love Jesus."

(PP - Bumper sticker)

I like a bumper sticker I saw many years ago. It said, "Tithe if you love Jesus! Anyone can honk!"

Suggested Closing Hymn - *I'd Rather Have Jesus, SDA Hymnal, page 327*