

Does the Bible Condemn Tax Withholding?

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In 21st century America, State and Federal governments seem to require all private employers to withhold part of an employee's wages. This is the way it's always been, and the way we have to do things if we want to be in business, right?

Wait a minute, there's something very wrong with this picture! The Bible has much to say about employers, wages, and even withholding. Sadly, the church and modern day employers, even Christian employers, seem to have somehow forgotten or overlooked these biblical principles.

Even as ancient Israel and Judah were carried away captive to Babylon, we have been captivated by immersion in our own culture. The practice of wage withholding, introduced during World War II in a fervor of wartime nationalism, has never since been repealed.

"Another important feature of the income tax that changed was the return to income tax withholding as had been done during the Civil War. This greatly eased the collection of the tax for both the taxpayer and the Bureau of Internal Revenue. However, it also greatly reduced the taxpayer's awareness of the amount of tax being collected, i.e. it reduced the transparency of the tax, which made it easier to raise taxes in the future." – U.S. Treasury - Fact Sheet on the History of the U.S. Tax System

Generations have now grown up with wage withholding, knowing nothing else. "Modern" Bible translations have also obscured the original language of Scripture, and so I will at times provide quotations from Young's literal translation for clarity, or cite the original languages.

What biblical "first principles" bear on this topic? Going back to basics, we find the concept of *property* embodied in the *"You shall not steal"* of Exodus 20:15 and Deuteronomy 5:19. These verses raise a simple question about withholding: "Whose money is it, anyway?"

First and foremost, everything belongs to God (Psalm 50:10-12). He created man with the ability to labor and His word approvingly describes contracts in which labor is exchanged for wages. (e.g. Gen. 30:31-33). Scripture clearly teaches that a person's labor is inherently their private, personal property. Jesus said, *"...the laborer is worthy of his wages."* (Luke 10:7) According to Jesus, it is the laborer who owns and is entitled to the fruit of his own labor.

Because the fruit of one's labor is a stewardship from God, God has first claim on wages. This is the concept of *first-fruits*. By demanding withholding, government is effectively staking first claim on the worker's wages, thus preemptively preventing the worker from first honoring God.

"...that you shall take some of the first of all the produce of the ground, which you shall bring from your land that the LORD your God is giving you, and put it in a basket and go to the place where the LORD your God chooses to make His name abide." - Deuteronomy 26:2

"...and now, behold, I have brought the firstfruits of the land which you, O LORD, have given me.' "Then you shall set it before the LORD your God, and worship before the LORD your God. So you shall rejoice in every good thing which the LORD your God has

given to you and your house, you and the Levite and the stranger who is among you.” - Deuteronomy 26:10, 11

Because of the importance of property and of first-fruits, Scripture speaks to employers about withholding, invariably in a negative light, clearly identifying the practice of withholding wages of a hired person as *robbery*.

"You shall not cheat your neighbor, nor rob him. The wages of him who is hired shall not remain with you all night until morning.” - Leviticus 19:13

Another word used in scripture to condemn the withholding of wages is *oppression*, and in the same context, not paying a worker all of his wages in a timely fashion is described as *sin*.

"You shall not oppress a hired servant who is poor and needy, whether one of your brethren or one of the aliens who is in your land within your gates. Each day you shall give him his wages, and not let the sun go down on it, for he is poor and has set his heart on it; lest he cry out against you to the LORD, and it be sin to you.”

- Deuteronomy 24:14,15

If that were not enough of a negative description, the prophet Jeremiah adds the words *unrighteousness* and *injustice* to the mix.

*"Woe to him who builds his house by unrighteousness
And his chambers by injustice,
Who uses his neighbor's service without wages
And gives him nothing for his work” - Jeremiah 22:13*

The prophet Malachi lists employers that withhold (the “*oppressors of the hire of an hireling*” - Young’s) along with a despicable collection of other evildoers.

*“And I will come near you for judgment;
I will be a swift witness
Against sorcerers,
Against adulterers,
Against perjurers,
Against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans,
And against those who turn away an alien--
Because they do not fear Me,”
Says the LORD of hosts.” – Malachi 3:5*

James, probably alluding to these Old Testament passages, condemns the withholding of wages as *fraud*, and warns employers that they will pay a penalty in judgment from the Lord.

“Come now, you rich, weep and howl for your miseries that are coming upon you! Your riches are corrupted, and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver are corroded, and their corrosion will be a witness against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have heaped up treasure in the last days. Indeed the wages of the laborers who

mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the reapers have reached the ears of the Lord of Sabaoth.” James 5:1-4

Does Scripture address government workers on the matter of withholding taxes? Yes, it does. Consider what John the Baptist said to tax collectors (the IRS workers of that day) and soldiers (the tax enforcement arm of the day.)

“Tax collectors also came to be baptized and said to him, “Teacher, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Collect no more than you are authorized to do.” Soldiers also asked him, “And we, what shall we do?” And he said to them, “Do not extort money from anyone by threats or by false accusation, and be content with your wages.”

- Luke 3:10-14

The word rendered *extort* in verse 14 is from the Greek *dia-seiw*, meaning “*take money by violence or force*”. It is common knowledge that the IRS does this on a regular basis, for which they are clearly to be condemned.

If involuntary withholding of funds were done on behalf of anyone other than the government, it would be the clearly criminal act called "conversion" – that is, theft committed by transferring one person's property to the benefit of anyone or anything else. How then can we countenance withholding for the government? That the government is the beneficiary of the conversion in the case of withholding makes it no less a crime.

What are some of the arguments employers might be tempted to use in order to justify withholding?

• **Doesn't the employee owe the government those taxes? You know, “Render therefore to all their due: taxes to whom taxes are due...”** - Rom 13:7

Whether or not an employee owes a tax is a matter between that person and the government, not the employer's business. "Pay what is due" is a command to the worker, not the employer!

• **I've never heard this stated or preached before; how could it be true?**

We live in "Babylon" and are corrupted by cultural immersion. “*Woe is me, that I dwell in Meshech!*” - Psalms 120:5 Furthermore, we have not been trained to be thoroughly biblical in our thinking. Churches, increasingly co-opted by government, are reluctant to teach anything that might cause them to lose their “501 (c) 3 tax-exempt status”. Government and the media also work hand-in-hand to vilify those who do not toe the line when it comes to taxation.

• **I'm not keeping the withholding for myself!**

Indirectly, you *are* withholding for your own benefit, if you are doing so out of fear in order to prevent government reprisal. You are, essentially, “taking a bribe” in the sense of receiving a benefit (government protection) in exchange for wrongdoing. “*And you shall take no bribe, for a bribe blinds the discerning and perverts the words of the righteous.*” - Exodus 23:8 (see also Deuteronomy 16:19 and 27:25)

• **The government commands me to withhold wages!**

If you study the law itself, you will find (as many have) that there is in fact no law requiring private employers to withhold wages from their workers (see for example the interview with

Dave Champion in *Business Reform* [now *Christian Business Daily*] Vol. 4 No. 2).
See: <http://www.businessreform.com/article.php?articleID=10559>

The employer who does not withhold is actually acting within the law, and consequently more and more employers are ceasing to withhold.

Unfortunately, most private employers have *not* read the law, and simply *assume* that they must withhold wages. Sadly, the IRS has not only nurtured that misunderstanding, but has corruptly prosecuted Christian businessmen of good conscience (e.g. google Richard Simkanin) who have chosen to *obey* the law.

However, even if there *were* a law that required withholding, as Christians we are called to answer to the *highest* authorities (i.e God and Scripture), ignoring lower authorities if and as necessary. "We ought to obey God rather than men." - Acts 5:29

"Let every soul be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and the authorities that exist are appointed by God." (Let every soul to the *higher authorities* be subject, - Young's) – Romans 13:1

• **The government will harm me if I don't withhold!**

When faced with a choice between biblical justice and submission to government, we are called upon to fear God, not men. "*But the midwives feared God, and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but saved the male children alive.*" - Ex 1:17

What shall we conclude? I have often found that unless and until I am confronted with relevant biblical truth in a direct application to my daily practices, I continue blissfully unaware of my own divergence from the ideals of Scripture. It is my hope with this article to sound the clarion call to Christian businessmen, reminding us of our primary obligations to God and His principles. If you are an employer, you are the first level of "justice in the gates" for most common working men and women.

If Christian employers would only provide a refuge of just and biblical dealings with their workers, government oppression by excessive and involuntary taxation would soon fall.