

The Tithe

Malachi 3:6-18

June 20, 2010

As we begin, I am fully aware that people who do not attend a church regularly often view churches as hungry for money and simply a vehicle for the people running the churches (pastors especially) to move money from the pockets of the congregation to their own. The accusation is made that all the church thinks about or wants is money. L. Ron Hubbard once famously quipped that starting a religion was a good way to make a million dollars. Too many times I have seen pastors and churches live down to that low understanding. Too often on television one preacher or another focuses on getting people to give him money which he says will force a blessing out of God's hands.

The result of this awareness in me has been to largely avoid the topic of money. When it has come up in our texts on Sunday mornings I have handled it in context, though as often as not it has been to downplay the importance of money and to focus our attention on God and the ministry and mission He has given us. In my nearly eleven years as the pastor of this congregation I have only preached one or two sermons on money, and I have only mentioned the idea of tithing a handful of times, often just as the example of what was done in the past or, most recently, in connection with the tithe Abraham gave to Melchizedek.

Those of you who are here on a regular basis know I do not usually talk about money. If you are new to the congregation, please understand that money is not our focus here, so this message is a bit of an aberration.

Dealing with the issue of giving is important, however. Jesus understood the powerful grip wealth has on the human heart. It holds incredible sway both over those who have a lot of it and over those who have very little. Over the years we have talked about this grip in the context of the congregation's life together, and the implications for our lives as individuals. This morning we address the direct teaching of the Bible to the issue of giving of our money to the church.

This morning's text begins with God's statement that He does not change. God does not **change**. His purposes stay the same. His people will always be His people, even though their sin at times means God acts more to correct them than to bless them. All of this is to our benefit, though at times it may not seem like it. God has always been this way toward His people, and just as He did not change in the days of Malachi, He has not changed in our day. His expectations remain the same. All that has changed is that He has more clearly revealed His grace to us and the extent to which He will go to redeem us for Himself. It is in this context that God addresses the people's relationship with money. God's people have a long history of disobedience. Now, through Malachi, God spoke to the aspect of that disobedience that involved their money. They were not giving the commanded tithe.

God declared that He considers not giving the tithe of our money to the ministry of His people to be **robbery**. That is a strong word. We don't often think of the idea of robbing God, but we do it all the time. We rob God when we give less money than He calls us to give. We rob God when we withhold from Him anything that properly belongs to Him. Of course,

everything is His, including us, and especially us if we are in Christ.

The tithe was a widely established amount of money given by someone to another with authority over them. We have already seen how Abraham gave a tithe to Melchizedek. God's people were commanded to give a tithe of their income to the priests in order to support the work of the temple and the priesthood. Simply put, the tithe is ten **percent** of a person's income. If a farmer harvested ten acres, then the first acre of produce belonged to God. If a merchant earned ten silver pieces, the first one belonged to God. Within the context of God's people, the tithe is a statement that the first tenth of our income is to be given to God for the organized work of His people.

Often we do not give the tithe because we do not think we have it to give. Especially in difficult financial times, it is easy to think that we cannot afford to give God ten percent of what we earn. I know I have fallen prey to this thinking myself on occasion. The good news is that God promises to bless those who give to Him and that He will take care of your needs if you put Him first.

It is true that we can't out-give God. It is true that God blesses those who give to Him, and that He blesses them in proportion to their gift and far more than they give. Malachi raises that issue here and Jesus expanded on it in His teaching. Where many preachers go wrong here is in telling the people that God gives now and in kind—that the blessings are for this life and that they are material and financial. Malachi is clear that God's greatest blessings await the end of time, so they are likely not for this life and they await a time when money and material blessings as we understand them will be

useless. God's greatest gift is Himself. He provides for our needs directly and through His people. The relationships we grow are far more important to Him than the amount of resources we have.

Having said this, God promises that if we put Him and His authority **first**, then He will provide all we need in this life when we need it. He wants us to make wise decisions and to properly invest our resources. He also says, and we easily miss, that giving to Him is a proper investment and, like the tithe, the one we ought to make first with all of our resources, including our money. Again, I have noticed this to be true for me. When I give a tithe, I am actually far more likely to have money left over at the end of the month. Mathematically, it doesn't make any sense, but it's true.

The question then comes to us, "Does God still expect a tithe?" There are three truths that will lead us to an answer to this question. First, God never set the **tithe** aside. There are passages in the New Testament that describe God bringing an end to the sacrificial system for the forgiveness of sin. We just looked at some of them in our study of the letter to the Hebrews. There are passages in the New Testament that describe the setting aside of the dietary laws of the Old Covenant. Most of the descriptions and commands regarding our behavior in the New Testament echo and reinforce the Old Testament law codes, however. The law is no longer binding on us as regards our sinful state, but in the New Covenant we are strongly encouraged to maintain behavior in keeping with it because it reflects God's desires for us. The tithe is included in that code.

Second, God owns **everything**, including us. If He owns us, then He owns everything we have. Ten

percent should be considered the minimum. Jesus, in the Sermon on the Mount, established a pattern of calling His followers to go beyond the law. We are not under the law, but our behavior is expected to exceed it. The law condemned murder. Jesus condemns hatred. The law condemned adultery. Jesus condemns lust. The law required the tithe. Jesus required of the rich young ruler everything he had.

Third, God's **promise** to bless giving, especially sacrificial giving, still stands. He promises to give us all we need now, and when the end comes, if not before, to give us far more than we give to Him. For this we go back to our morning's text. Look at God's promise through Malachi. "*Test me in this, says the LORD Almighty, 'and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.'*" (v.10) God commanded the people of Judah to test Him. We are not to test God out of doubt or belief, but it is okay to test what we hear from Him to make sure we hear correctly, as long as we obey. Abraham did it. Gideon did it. Indeed, God commands us to test everything we hear by His word. Here we have God's command to step out in faith, give Him what He requires, and see how He responds.

The answer to the question then should be, "Yes." God expects a tithe, and more. The definitive answer to this comes from a conversation Jesus had with the Pharisees. They had challenged Jesus on the concept of paying taxes to a government that was over-reaching its power and was oppressing them. As the United States of America, our founding was a result of similar circumstances. Jesus asked for a coin and when He was

given one, He asked who's image was on it. The reply came that Caesar's image was on the coin. Jesus then gave the classic answer, "*Give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and to God what is God's.*" (Matthew 22:21) Of course, being good Jews, those who heard Jesus, upon hearing talk of images being on things would have thought of the account of Creation. In Genesis we read, "*So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them.*" (Genesis 1:27) Jesus' clear statement is that we are created in God's image, and so we belong to Him. If under the Old Covenant the tithe belonged to God, in the New Covenant all we are and have are to be His to control. This means we are to make available to Him far more than the tithe.

We are also commanded to support those who help us grow in our faith. This means that we are to **give** to the ministries from which we benefit. While Paul steadfastly refused to accept any money for his missionary work, he held firmly to the belief that people who benefitted spiritually from godly teaching ought to support those who taught them financially. He made this point many times. Writing to the Corinthians, Paul said, "*Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in what is offered on the altar? In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel.*" (1 Corinthians 9:13,14) And in a list of general instructions to the Galatians, Paul included, "*Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.*" (Galatians 6:6) In his instructions to Timothy, Paul told this pastor to, "*Command those who*

are rich in this present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. Command them to do good, to be rich in good deeds, and to be generous and willing to share. In this way they will lay up treasure for themselves as a firm foundation for the coming age, so that they may take hold of the life that is truly life.” (1 Timothy 6:17-19)

Returning to the point that God promises to provide for those who don't rob Him, Paul wrote to the Corinthians, *“Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.”* (2 Corinthians 9:6-8)

This belief in our need to give to God both to reduce money's hold on us and to provide for the mission and ministry of the church is foundational to our church. Our constitution includes giving of our resources to the church among the requirements for active membership. In our covenant we promise to “cheerfully contribute of our means, according to our ability as God has prospered us,” to the work of the church. In the Spiritual Gift Inventory we recently completed, Giving ranked high among the congregation.

We are not going to be legalistic about this. Nobody in the leadership of this church is going to ask you to submit last year's tax return so we can compare it with your giving record. Some churches do that, but it is

going too far. In the end, the amount you give is between you and God. This congregation is starting to reach out and engage in more ministries and mission. While these things do not cost a lot of money, there is some cost associated with them. In addition, if we are to stay in this building and use it as our base of operations, we must continue to maintain it in good condition and keep the electricity and heat on. These things cost money. While it is good to give extra for special needs, ministries, and missions, such as the speaker from Chosen People Ministries who will be here next week, it is important, literally vital, that we give regularly of our means to support the day to day operations of our ministry together.

If you are not giving a tithe, I ask you to seriously consider it. I have been told that a former pastor here placed a challenge before the church to give the tithe for six months. He said that, if anybody gave a tithe, and was not financially better off after six months, the church would refund their money. I'm not making that promise here this morning, but I have been told that after six months, nobody asked for their money back. I am calling you to test God in this. Give the tithe. Give more than the tithe. See what blessings God pours out on you and watch His ability to use this congregation grow.