

Straight Talk on a Sensitive Subject

Malachi 3:6-12; Luke 11:37-53

Since I started preaching a little over 30 years ago, I've experienced the JOY of preaching on some great themes in the Bible, themes like GRACE and FAITH and HOPE and LOVE. What's there NOT to like off that list? When we encounter themes like that, it's like dipping a dry sponge into water – we soak it up!

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But THEN, there's OTHER thematic threads running dia the fabric of Scripture that we are NOT by nature drawn to: Sin, Judgment, wrath, hell, and MONEY. In fact, I have etched deep my memory a certain time in my life where I observed 1st hand just HOW sensitive people get about money. [A few years out of college, I agreed to work for a limited time as a teller in a new bank in Hattiesburg. Having "been there, done that", I have a deep respect for bank tellers and all the GRIEF they have to deal w/ on a day-by-day basis from customers who get absolutely IRATE about their money. In those 3 months, I saw people act out temper tantrums worthy of a 3 year old when they have their Halloween candy stolen from them. I watched one time when a wealthy customer shut down an entire teller line for a whole hour because what the teller counted was LESS than what was on the deposit slip -- less by 1 PENNY!] Amazing how totally bent out of shape people can get about shekels!

That's why sermons on giving -- and especially on tithing – I really want to avoid (pardon the pun) at all costs! Maybe that's why (and I'm not proud of this), in 3 decades, I've only preached specifically on tithing 2, maybe 3 times! And yet, I have been accused in the past of preaching too much about money! Go figure. Maybe it's because I'm preaching to Presbyterians! [You know, AMERICAN Presbyterianism has its roots in Scottish Presbyterianism; and Scotsmen have a track record for being tight as bark on a tree!]

[My former Professor, fellow minister, and friend Roy Taylor tells of young preacher in a small rural country PCA church in South Mississippi. Ten people in the church had strong Scottish blood running dia their veins. Preacher decided to preach on tithing. Beforehand, he approached the Chairman of the Diaconate and said, "Wire the pews, and when I ask 'Will everyone who pledges to tithe next year please stand up!', you throw the switch, and the electricity will literally *shock* the parishioners into standing!" That Sunday, in that rural church, a record 70 people attended. At end of the sermon, the preacher gave the challenge, the deacon threw the switch, and as a result of the combined efforts of the preacher and the Deacon, 60 people pledged to tithe, and 10 Scotsmen died!] Seems like some people would rather lose their life than let go of their money!

Did you know? Scholars who have given themselves to a lifetime of closely examining the teachings of Jesus have discovered the two subjects Jesus spoke about more than any other subjects were: 1) Hell, and 2) giving. Some would see a close connection between the two!

This Morning, we're going to discover together what the BIBLE says **and** what Jesus says about tithing. And what we're after here is nothing more or less than Bible clarity; because it seems like people are either confused or convoluted when it comes to this sensitive subject of tithing.

So let me ask you ~ nicely ~ to simply listen to what God is telling you through His Word about TITHING. And PLEASE . . . listen with an open mind; and if you're not convinced and/or convicted about tithing, then at least you can say you've given God's Word a fair hearing. OK?

Now, when it comes to tithing, a Text from both the Old Testament and the New Testament speaks to this issue. The first Text comes from the Old Testament book of Malachi [My former OT Professor and Friend Dr. Ralph Davis would sometimes call him “Ma-LACH-ee, the Italian Prophet . . . “].

In this book, the Prophet is cast in the role of God’s Prosecuting Attorney, bringing a court case against God’s people. The charge against God’s people is that they have not been *faithful* in their relationship to The Lord GOD, Who HAD been consistently faithful to them.

As the Lord’s Lawyer brings specific charges against God’s people, He targets the issue of tithing. What the Prophet says is that God’s people, like an unfaithful Bride, have broken Covenant with the Lord, and one evidence of breaking Covenant is, well, let’s read from Malachi 3:1-12

⁷ *Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.*

“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’

⁸ *“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.*

“But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’

“In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 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 there will not be room enough to store it. ¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the LORD Almighty. ¹² “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty.

Now, having thought for quite some time about how to approach this sensitive subject, probably the best approach is to just lay our cards on the table and deal directly from Scripture with this issue of Tithing. **Let’s consider together both the CHALLENGE of tithing AND the BLESSING of tithing.**

1. Let’s consider the CHALLENGE of Tithing.

We’ll spend 95% of our time here. What you need to know right off the bat: ***When we do NOT Tithe, TITHING is NOT the problem!*** [A sign on the town clock that always kept the wrong time reads, “Don’t blame what you see; the problem lies deeper than what’s on the surface.”] Think of it this way: Not tithing is a fever, an outward manifestation of an inner infection.

Again, not tithing is NEVER a problem in our lives. NOT TITHING is simply a SYMPTOM of a couple of DEEPER problems. 1 problem: ***Our NOT Tithing is symptomatic of our DISTANCE from God.*** NOT physical distance. God IS everywhere present to us. . . . but RELATIONAL distance. [Like being in the same room w/a significant other, yet feeling this “distance” between the 2 of you.] OUR relationship w/Lord NEVER static, either drawing closer to Him or drifting apart from Him. HE doesn’t move; WE do! People who turn away from tithing are demonstrating their relational distance from the Lord.

Verse 10 is a command, a decree. God's decrees, His Laws are not abstract concepts but expressions of Who God is . . . [in college football, when an opposing stomping on the Logo of the Home Team, it usually results in a fight!] Why? After all, it's just some paint on a field, right? No, the symbol represents the school; and to stomp on the symbol is to insult the School represented BY the symbol! The Law of God is an extension, a representation of WHO God is, His Holy Character; and to turn away from the Law is something the Lord takes very personally!

But notice something else. ***Our NOT Tithing is ALSO symptomatic of STEALING from the Lord.*** Verse 8 is quite clear. [Let's say the fine Grand Piano in our church was valued at \$6K. And let's say 1 day you pull up to the church, a truck is backed up to the front door, and someone is carrying the grand piano out the door. You ask "WHY?" He replies, "Because I'm a church member and I want to." Hopefully you'd respond, "But that's stealing!" And you'd be right on target! It IS stealing, because the piano does not belong to the person taking the piano.] But listen. According to the clear teaching of God's Word, IF you make \$60K and do NOT Tithe \$6K to the church (In ***Vs 10, it's*** WHOLE Tithe = 10% of what you have is to go into the church), you are stealing from the Lord!

Now, this ***DISTANCE*** from the Lord evidenced through NOT Tithing; this ***STEALING*** from the Lord carries consequences in the Life of the Church, the Covenant Community. In Verse 9 "***curse***" means "to BIND" or "to RESTRICT" or "to CONFINE". In other words, when the members of a church do not Tithe TO the church, the church is bound, restricted as to what it can do.

The plain fact of the matter is, MINISTRY COSTS MONEY! Staff, materials, equipment, Bibles, buildings didn't just fall from the sky. And when the ministries of the church – ministry of the Word, Music, Fellowship, Outreach, Evangelism, Teaching, Missions, mercy, – ministry to adults / teens / children – are NOT funded 1st out of 10% of EVERY MEMBER'S INCOME ~ the ministries of the church are restricted and Christ's Body here at Lakeland Presbyterian Church is bound and tied up by the rope of our own stingy disobedience to this command to tithe!

That's the clear teaching of this Text. Still, in spite of what GOD is telling us to do in Text – because our HEARTSTRINGS are tied to our PURSESTRINGS -- people still try to *rationalize away* this command. [I remember hearing a story about the power money has over our rational facilities. Seems a pastor was not going to do a funeral for a member's dog until he was told he'd get paid \$12 for his services. Pastor's rationalization? "I just found out the dog was a PRESBYTERIAN dog!"]

Down through the years, I've heard ***5 basic rationalizations*** people give for NOT Tithing. Please let me share them with you. **1) "I don't Tithe, I give as the Lord leads."** Well, unless you're at least tithing, you're not giving as the Lord leads because Malachi 3:10 is a COMMAND, and the Lord would never lead you to *disobey* 1 of His Commands! You might as well be saying, "The Lord led me to LIE / STEAL / be unfaithful to my wife . . . disobey this or that Command." IF you give as the Lord Leads, you will at least Tithe!

2) "I Tithe my time and talents. That's my Tithe." In the Bible, the Tithe may include your time and talents, but the Tithe **ALWAYS** Includes 10% of your TREASURE – 10% of the Fruits of your labor, your profits. It's not either/or, but both/and. In fact, a majority of references to tithing in the Bible are financial in nature, taking to the temple 10% of what you make or earn.

3) "I will give more when I make more." I understand. I, too, know what it's like to have my 100% cotton paycheck shrink in the hot water of taxes and hyper-inflation. But there's no "if" in that Malachi Command. And, friends, There's no socio-economic level attached to this command. ["Those

who make \$100K, give 10% to the church; if you make less, bring less . . . “]. It’s not like a graduated Tax. Whether you make, 4, 5, or 6 figure salary, divide that paycheck(s) by 10, and that’s what you Tithe! To do anything less is both robbing God AND binding the ministry of the church!

2 more trump cards people try to deal off the bottom of the deck of excuses for NOT Tithing:

4) **“I don’t tithe because tithing is just an Old Testament practice!”** Let’s put that excuse to rest once and for all; and let’s give this excuse a decent burial so it may R. I. P! Usually, running tandem w/this excuse is something to the effect that “Jesus never mentioned Tithing, nor did Jesus EVER tell us to Tithe!”

REALLY?!? Consider the following Scripture from Luke 11:

⁴² *“Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. **You should have practiced the latter** without leaving the former undone.*

Here’s the context of this Verse. Jesus is taking off the gloves and pounding the Pharisees. He’s hammering the teachers of the Law. I mean, the Lord’s “Lettin’ the Big Dog eat.” But in the middle of all these left hooks and haymakers of “WOES” He’s landing on the glass jaws of the Pharisees, and Teachers of the Law, Jesus says something about TITHING.

In Verse 42, Jesus says, “You give a 10th of what you have, right down to the spices in your spice racks . . . “ Notice, as Jesus is lambasting the Pharisees for the “F’s” (“O’s”) they’ve made on their report cards in the subjects of “Justice 101” and “Loving God 101,” Jesus tells the Pharisees and us: When you TITHED, you were doing what you SHOULD have done. Yes, you SHOULD practice Tithing! Jesus is saying when you tithe, you’re doing what you should be doing!

The 5th Excuse is often offered by people who simply do not understand what they are saying: **“I don’t Tithe because tithing is too legalistic!”** So, what is “legalism”? Legalism is the belief that there’s something you can do ~ some action you can take ~ that will somehow make you more acceptable to God. Legalism’s the belief, “There’s something I can DO to merit or earn God’s approval and love.” If you could read the mind of a legalist, the thought’s, “The more I GIVE, the more God will LOVE me.” The legalist thinks he/she can buy God’s love.

If legalism was an accurate representation of Christian thought, if God’s love and acceptance of you was something you could *earn* or *buy*, Christianity would be just like every other religion on the face of this earth. But praise God! Christianity is NOT good ADVICE about what YOU must DO to EARN God’s favor and love. Christianity is 1st and foremost and fundamentally an ANNOUNCEMENT about the GRACE of God in Christ Jesus. *Christianity is the story about what God has done for you through the life and death of Jesus!* The Gospel Truth is, God does love you, and He’s proven His love for you by giving you His Son.

When it comes to tithing, the issue of does God love me IF I don’t tithe is NOT an issue at all. You ARE loved by God. And there’s NOTHING you can DO to make God love you any MORE or any LESS than He does right now!

You see, beloved, For US, the ISSUE is NEVER, “Does the LORD love ME?” The ISSUE for US is this Morning is This: **“Do I love the LORD?”** And when it comes to gauging our love for the Lord, Jesus gives you/me an accurate, objective Standard for measuring our love for Him. In **John 14:15**, and

echoed throughout the New Testament, the clear message is: ***“If YOU love ME, you WILL OBEY whatever I command.”*** And yes, that ***“whatever”*** INCLUDES the COMMAND to TITHE!

So, WHEN you receive your commitment card in the mail, I encourage you to ask yourself this question, “HOW do I DEMONSTRATE my LOVE for this JESUS who LOVES ME and GAVE Himself FOR me?” The obvious answer is: You pledge to tithe 10th of your income to church Jesus loved and lived and died for. And then, as you progress dia the year 2012, think of every TITHE check you write as a VALENTINE expressing the deep deep love you have in your heart ~ and expressed from your checkbook ~ for the One who ***“ . . . Who loved me and GAVE Himself for me . . . ” (Galatians 2:20)*** [As Bumper Sticker reads, “TITHE if you love Jesus. ANYBODY can HONK!”]

Friends, the VALENTINE that is the tithe is NOT be the CEILING of your giving, but the FLOOR! Tithing’s NOT the finished line, but 1st lunge out of the starting blocks. In fact, as you reflect on the extravagance of God’s gracious gifts to you ~ gifts like life, breath, and everything in your life that falls under the category of “good” ~ you’ll WANT to give MORE . . . but you will NEVER desire to give LESS than 10% of your income to the Lord!

2. Let’s consider the BLESSING of Tithing

Back to ***Malachi 3*** . . . Consider the UPSIDE of Tithing in ***Vv 10-12*** . . . Friends, @ the end of the day, Tithing is nothing but a GOOD thing! Vs 10a is the ONLY PLACE in the Bible where we’re actually told to test the Lord. “Go ahead and test Me,” God says, “I will PASS this test w/Flying Colors!”

Vs 10b reveals a word used to describe the Flood in Noah’s Time when the sky BURST OPEN with enough water to totally blanket the earth and cover the mountains! God says, “I will FLOOD /SATURATE the landscape of your life and the life of Lakeland Presbyterian Church with the blessings of *great* abundance, with *unlimited* productivity, with *Jaw-dropping* joy, with deep delight!” Friends, for the well-being and health and future of this church AND for your future, there’s absolutely NO DOWNSIDE whatsoever to Tithing!