

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Malachi 3:6-12

Sermon Title: "Keeping the Ship Afloat: Stewardship (a "Sermon on the Amount")"

Morrow Presbyterian Church, Morrow, GA

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The time has come for churches to look at their budgets. Sessions meet to discuss what the church needs in donations compared to all the expenses that have to be paid out. As we know, the offerings have not been consistent, and so we have wondered if there is enough money during the next week to pay all the bills. God is good, even though we may worry. God will provide, and he asks us to support his ministries through tithing.

God created this spiritual discipline of tithing thousands of years ago. God had to set up an efficient system to assist the community of his beloved people, as they lived together. There were poor people in this community, and they had no consistent way of making a living. Their income was low, lower than low, and so God created the system of tithing to help them. There were priests who had to facilitate worship, and God did not want them to taking in a yearly salary or own property. It would distract from their abilities to be priests. However, their basic needs of food and

clothing and shelter had to be met – the same with the poor – and so God created the tithing system to help them.

But God wanted more to come from this spiritual discipline. God wanted tithing itself to be a limitless expression of appreciation. In many ways we may express our thanks to God for all he has done for us. We might just say, “Thank you, Lord,” and even say a nifty prayer thereafter, but we may feel we need to do more. We may have to act out our thanksgiving, because actions speak louder than words. God created the spiritual discipline of tithing as an act of worship. We may put our money where our mouths are.

God says that, in tithing, we may give 10% of our income and of our possessions as an act of thanks. We look at what we make in a year, and we figure that 10% of it may go to God. If we make \$1000, then \$100 of it goes to God. During the time of the Israelites, that money would be distributed to the poor and the priests as a gift. We then would keep the other \$900 of our salary to do as we need.

God had also set it up for farmers to give 10% of their crops or cattle to God. For example, if a person has ten cows, one of those cows goes to God as a sacrifice. If a person has ten rows of corn in a field,

one of the rows goes to the Lord. Ten percent of everything a person produces in a year is supposed to go to God for a special purpose. It is our visual act of worship and thanksgiving.

Sounds like a pretty good system, definitely better than what the government wants from us in taxes. The government wants about 15% from us in federal taxes, although that amount goes up significantly as we make more money. On top of that, Georgia wants us to pay a tax of 6%, which is nearly double what I used to pay in PA. So about 21% of our money goes toward taxes alone. God is looking for 10%. From every ten dollars we earn, the government gets over two dollars but God gets only one. We keep the rest. Our 10% is used to help relieve the stress of suffering in the world, to give benefits to people who cannot receive their own benefits, and to give proper honor to God for all God gives us.

Tithing is a good effective system God has created, but not everyone thinks so. On the whole, people like to keep their money close to them. They get worried about the money they have – they even get worried about the money they don't have – so giving one out of ten to God sounds like too much.

Everybody wants a piece of us. We talked about

what the government wants every year in taxes, but then there are insurance costs to worry about. That might be a large chunk of change we have to release. There are general medical bills to worry over, whether we plan for them or not. A few Saturdays ago, I didn't plan to visit a hospital's ER because I didn't plan to break my right collarbone while cycling with my son. Accidents happen and medical attention is needed, but people want to be paid for giving us such attention. The money seems to escape our grasp faster than we can earn it. Gasoline prices, electric bills, food costs, union dues... so many different individuals want the nine out of ten we are allowed to keep that not much of the nine is left when all the bills are paid.

We don't think we have much money to play with. The bank account seems so small as the months come and go. We look at the tithe we should give to God – that one out of ten that God requires us to give to help others – and we panic. We think we cannot give up that one out of ten. It has to be used for something else, we rationalize. So we withhold our tithe, and thus withhold giving any help to others, and thus withhold giving any thanksgiving to God.

No matter what financial stresses we face, strangely enough God does not make allowances for

them. No matter what we owe in taxes or insurance or credit card bills, God does not shift the 10% he requires, making it lesser according to our income. Ten percent is ten percent, and it rightfully belongs to God.

In the very last book of the Old Testament, God addresses the people of Israel through a prophet called Malachi. From the look of things in Malachi, it appears that the people have strayed far away from God. They are so far gone, that God has to call them into a courthouse to pass judgment upon them. The subpoena is submitted, and the people have a court date that they must meet. What are they charged with? For ignoring the commandments of God. For not keeping them every single day, and not inserting them in all their undertakings and relationships. One of those commandments that they failed to follow was this simple task of tithing. They neglected to give over their one out of ten, the one that God rightly deserves. The priests have not received any financial support, and the poor remain poor. The overall worship of God has fallen apart.

“Can a person rob God,” God asks in Malachi 3. “And yet you are robbing me.” Whoa, wait a minute. Are we robbing God? How are we? To rob somebody means to have premeditated intent. It means to have

a plan and to have the motivation to execute that plan, and to actually take something from somebody that does not belong to us. Have we ever done this, targeted one of God's rightful possessions and stolen it? God's indictment against his people stands.

The people question what God is accusing them of doing, "But how are we robbing you?" The answer: in tithing and contributions, or more specifically in not giving tithes and contributions for the glory of God, for the overall worship of God. This is how the people are thieves against God. The whole nation of Israel is found guilty.

When we do not give our tithe to God, we are robbing him. These are not my words – these are God's words. This is serious stuff. When we look at the insurance bill, and believe it is more important to pay it than give some tithe to God, we are robbing him. When we look at the credit cards, and believe that paying off our summer vacation and paying for our new iPhone5 or Droid phone are more important than worshipping our Lord, we are robbing him. If we miss a Sunday and forget to tithe, and then we forget another Sunday, and another, and another, we are robbing God. When we believe that making excuses for why we cannot tithe to God is more important than

putting some money where our mouths are, we are robbing God. Once again, not my words. God says this through Malachi.

This word of God goes out to the entire community. None of us are immune. Just because I am your pastor and receive my income from your tithes, that doesn't mean I am exempt from giving to the Lord 10% of what I earn. I cannot make any excuse, cannot declare pastoral privileges, and I certainly cannot tell y'all to tithe and then sit back and do nothing. I don't want to be called a thief. None of us do. We don't want to rob God of anything. God puts the indictment before us, and he asks us to make an account, and then he wants us to make amends and return back to him.

Hope is not lost, however. God makes an offer to his people. In fact, God presents a challenge to us that he will not make in any other part of Scripture.

God says, "Bring the entire tithe to the storehouses of the Lord, so there may be food in the temple." Bring what we owe to God in worship. Joyfully sacrifice our money as a thank offering to the Lord. And then God says, "Test me on tithing." God says, Test me! Challenge me! You will find nowhere else in the Bible that God tells his people to test him. When Jesus was

forty days in the desert with Satan, and Satan told him to throw himself down from the highest point of the temple, Jesus said “It is written that you will never put the Lord your God to the test.” In Exodus Moses once asked the people, “Why do you contend with me, and why do you put the Lord to the test?” You cannot do that at all. It can be said that Gideon once put God to the test by telling him to make a patch of fleece wet and the ground dry. And then Gideon tested him a second time by telling God to make the ground wet and the fleece dry. But unless your name is Gideon and you own a piece of sheep’s skin, you had better never put God to the test.

But God says it as bold as brass, “Test me.” “Test me on tithing, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessings that you will not have room enough for it all.

“Challenge me”, God say. “Call my bluff, if you think I am bluffing. Shut me up for calling you a thief, if you think you are so smart.” God lays down the gauntlet. Are we brave enough to pick it up?

“I dare you,” God says to us. “If you got the guts, if you got the courage to take my challenge, then bring it on. Offer your tithe to me. If you are of means, so to speak, then you should bring in the full 10%. If you are not of means, so to speak, you are not off the hook.

Even the poor widow went to the treasury of the temple and she put in her two copper pennies. She put in everything she had, more than 10% of her tithe. She gave up 100% of her income to worship the Lord. And she did so, because she believed that God would provide. At some point, God would provide the means for her to live, maybe even giving her two more copper pennies to pay the bills, to pay the rent, to get the food, to get the medical care she needed. She trusted God, and nothing held her back from worshipping God. Please test me on this, says the Lord. We will never hear such a challenge ever in the Bible. Take on God, and see what happens next.

God has his hand on the doorknob to throw open the floodgates of his heaven to bless everyone who calls upon the name of God. The floodgates will not open until we get back in God's system, the system of putting aside ten percent of all we make in a year, giving the rightful tithe to God in worship.

Those blessings do not mean more money in our pockets necessarily. There are too many "Name-it, Claim-it" preachers out who have equated the Lord's favor exclusively with financial gain. Too many of these preachers lie to people, claiming that if they give to God they will become rich. Only those preachers

are getting rich by their own so-called gospel. When God opens his floodgates of blessing to us, it does not necessarily mean we will be better off financially. However, it does mean that God will provide. God doesn't expect us to give some money and then hangs us out to dry. God provides as we worship him. The money is there, somehow, someway, because as we give we trust God will give us more to give, as well as to live. Try it and see.

Giving tithes to God means that there will be more. More blessing, more fellowship, more opportunity for worship, more opportunity to serve, more and more to offer to God and to others. When we give tithes to God, there will just be more in our lives. More reaping means more to go around. More reaping leads to more sowing, which means more growth and, again, more to go around. It is hard to explain. We may only experience the "more" of God if we take up the challenge.

The freedom to give up a bit of money turns into the freedom to trust that God will never let you go. The tithe to God turns us into joyful givers, happy people who want to find different ways to give a little more: a little more money, maybe, a little more time, a little more love. The blessings we receive are unlimited, pouring down from heaven.