

A Spiritual Spring for the Week

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Sermon Text: Malachi 3:6-12
Sermon Title: "10% - A Challenge, A Reward" (A Sermon on the Amount)

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{SLIDE 1} 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. God is good, even though we may worry about budgets and expenses. God will provide, as God asks us to support his ministries through tithing.

God created this spiritual discipline of tithing thousands of years ago. An efficient system to assist the community of God's beloved people was set up. There were the poor 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 also priests who had to facilitate worship. That was their sole duty: to facilitate worship; and so God did not want them taking in a yearly salary or owning property. It would distract from their abilities to be priests. Their basic needs of food and clothing and shelter had to be

met – the same with the poor – and so God created the system of tithing to help them.

{SLIDE 2} Yet, God wanted more to come from this spiritual discipline. God wanted more than economic stability for everyone. God wanted tithing itself to be an unencumbered expression of appreciation. God wanted tithing to be our way of giving of ourselves without reservation. 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 prayer thereafter. We may go out and do something for another person. We may serve the church in some leadership capacity. But there is a little more. God created the spiritual discipline of tithing as an act of showing thanks to God, and that we trust God, and that we will stay connected to our God no matter what may come. With service and prayer and worship – all wonderful expressions of appreciation, without reservation, without hesitation – there must also be tithing.

{SLIDE 3} God says that, in tithing, we give 10% of our income and of our possessions as an act of dedication. We look at what we make in a year, and we figure that 10% of it goes to God. If we make

\$1000, then \$100 of it goes to God. No exceptions, without hesitation. During the time of the Israelites, the 10% would be distributed to the poor and the priests as a gift. The people then would keep the other 90% of their money, and do with it as needed.

This 10% to God went beyond money. It also involved possessions. For example, farmers would give 10% of their crops or livestock to God. If a person has ten sheep, one of those sheep goes to God as a sacrifice. If a person has ten rows of wheat 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, no exceptions and without hesitation. 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.

{SLIDE 4} Tithing is an effective system that God has created, but not everyone thinks so. On the whole, people like to keep their money close to them. According to a survey in the Washington Post, “Americans give about 3 percent of their income to

charity each year.”¹ That is 3 times less than what God expects of us. During the recession of the last years, “poor and middle-class earners” dug a little deeper and increased their donations to 5 percent from 2006 to 2012. However, “those earning more than \$200,000 a year decreased their giving by roughly the same percentage [5%].” It is nice to hear that, even during the tough times, there are people who may don’t have a whole lot of money but who gave a little more in the offering plates. But that percentage is 5%, half of what God expects of us. People become worried about the money they have. They are worried about the money they don’t have. So giving one out of ten to God sounds like too much.

{SLIDE 5} Everybody wants a piece of us. The government wants our money every year in taxes. We pay Ad Valorem taxes on the vehicles we own. There are property taxes and sales taxes. But forget the taxes. What about medical expenses? There are general medical bills to worry over, whether we plan for them or not. Accidents happen and medical attention is needed. We don’t know when we may need to go to the hospital – we don’t know what the doctor is going to tell us.

¹ http://cdn.app.theweek.com/editions/com.dennis.theweek.issue.issue690/data/28815_af20951811f0cf91e9f9189bda268170/web.html.

Beyond taxes and medical bills, there are gasoline prices, electric bills, food costs, union dues, cell phone bills... The money seems to escape our grasp faster than we can earn it. We fear losing our money, whether all of it disappears or just some of it. So we hold onto what we have. We clutch it with desperation, and guard it with our lives. And then people are asked to give one out of ten to God, and they don't want to. They want to hold on to all their money. They want to keep all ten out of ten for themselves.

{SLIDE 6} We look at the tithe we should give to God – that one out of ten that God expects us to give to help others – and we panic. We think we cannot give up that one. It has to be used for something else, we rationalize. It has to be used for our survival, we convince ourselves. So we become tight-fisted. We make exceptions and hesitate with our tithe. We withhold giving any help to others. We withhold showing worship and thanksgiving and trust to God.

{SLIDE 7} 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%, making it 5% or 3%. Ten percent is ten percent. No exceptions, without hesitation. It rightfully belongs to God.

In the last book of the Old Testament, God addresses the people of Israel through a prophet named 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 something like a courthouse to pass judgment upon them. The subpoena is submitted, and the people have a mandatory court date to meet. What are the charges? Ignoring the commandments and statutes of God. Not keeping them every single day, not even inserting them in all their undertakings and relationships. One of those statutes 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. The poor remain poor. The overall worship of God has fallen apart. Nobody seems to trust God anymore.

“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 the motivation to execute that plan, 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 is scathing.

The people in Malachi question God, "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.

{SLIDE 8} When we do not give our tithe to God, all 10%, we are robbing God. 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 our 10% to God, we are robbing God. When we look at the credit cards, and believe that paying off our summer vacation and paying for our new iPhone 7 are more important than worshipping our Lord whom we trust with our lives, we are robbing him. If we miss a Sunday and forget to tithe, and then we forget another Sunday tithe, and another, and another, we are robbing God.

These words of God go out to the entire community. None of us is 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. When the family and I miss a Sunday or two because we're on vacation, we have to make it up. We want to make it up, because tithing is one of several important ways that we show unreserved, limitless appreciation to the God we trust. We either send a check to cover the Sundays we miss, or we go to our banks website and send an electronic check to the church. We do it out of love for God. Besides, we don't want to be called a thieves. None of us do. We don't want to rob God of anything, not our time, not our talents, and certainly not our treasures. God wants everything about us, including at least 10% of our money. Or else, we are thieves.

{SLIDE 9} Hope is not lost, however. God makes an offer to his people. In fact, God presents a challenge that will never be made 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 respectfully owe to God. Joyfully sacrifice 10% of our money as a thank offering to the Lord. And then God says, “Test me on tithing.” God says, Test me! Challenge me! We 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.”² In Exodus Moses once asked the people, “Why do you contend with me, and why do you put the Lord to the test?”³ We cannot do that. We offend God by thinking that we are better than God, that we can treat God like a scientific experiment to prove if God is really who he claims to be.

But God says as bold as brass in verse 10, “Test me.” We may translate that also as, “Tempt me,” “Put me on trial regarding this.”⁴ “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.” “Call my bluff, if you think I am bluffing,” God tells us. “Shut me up for calling you

² Matthew 4:7.

³ Exodus 17:2.

⁴ The Hebrew word is *baw-khan'*, which means generally and figuratively to *investigate*: - examine, prove, tempt, try (trial).

a thief, if you think you are so smart.” God lays down the gauntlet. Are we brave enough to pick it up?

Let us offer our full 10% to God without fail. Let us prove to God that money is not our God. Money is nice to have, but it is not more important than God. If God only wants 10%, God shall have it without reservation.

{SLIDE 10} Remember the story of Jesus standing near the vast treasury chest of the Temple, and Jesus noticing all the wealthy people bringing in their vast amounts of money.⁵ And then Jesus notices a poor widow who can only throw in two pennies for her offering to God. Although she is without means, no money left to buy bread, she shows her respect to God by offering her tithe. She gives more than 10% - she gives up 100% of her income to the Lord. She does so, because she believes that only God would provide, not money. Only God is her reason for living, not possessions. Yes, maybe her two copper pennies could have paid the bills or the rent. What is first and foremost on her mind is her relationship with God, and showing that her relationship must continue to be close and vibrant and deep. We don't read what

⁵ Mark 12:41-44.

happens to her, but we can be sure that God never abandoned her. For her two pennies, the floodgates of heaven opened to her. She would never deny God. She trusted God completely, and nothing held her back from worshipping God, not even her meager income.

{SLIDE 11} God created several spiritual disciplines, which help us to connect with God. Service and prayer, worship and Bible reading, just to name a few, help us develop and maintain a deeply rich relationship with God. Along with those and others, God created the spiritual discipline of tithing. We cannot ignore it. We share with God our time and talents, but we also share with God our treasure, at least 10% of it. When we tithe, we show that we trust God. We show that we honor God. By giving 10% of our money, we show that we want to be connected with God always.

Test me on this, says the Lord. Take on God with our money, and see what happens.

The Assurance of Pardon:

Hear the good news! Who is in the position to condemn us? Only Jesus Christ is, and he died for us. Christ rose for us. Christ reigns in power for us. Christ intercedes for us. Anyone who is in Christ is a new creation. The old life has gone; a new life has begun. Friends, believe the gospel: in Jesus Christ, we are forgiven. Amen.