

"Tithing Is More Than The Number Ten"
Stewardship Sermon by Dr. Peter Barnes
First Presbyterian Church – Boulder, Colorado
(Mal. 3:6-12)

Introduction.

Once there was an old \$50 bill and an old \$1 bill that were headed to the incinerator to be destroyed and replaced with new money. The \$50 bill said to the \$1 bill, "You know, I can't complain; it's been a good life. When I was first issued to a bank, a young couple took me on their honeymoon to Hawaii. I was in some of the best hotels and restaurants on the islands. Then I went from there to Japan, and I was in some the great hotels of that country. From Japan I was taken to New York, and there I went to the theater, Carnegie Hall, and to the great restaurants at Times Square. Yes, it's been a good life."

The \$1 bill replied, "I can't say the same for me. My whole life, all it's been is church, church, church!"¹

This funny tale reveals in a way that is all too close to home the manner in which we are quick to spend money on the other things in life, but slow to invest for the Lord. This morning I want to take a look at the subject of tithing. It was commanded in the OT, and it was commended by Jesus in the NT. As we look at this topic, I would like to focus our attention on: 1) the background to tithing; 2) the struggle with tithing; and 3) the blessing of tithing.

I. The Background To Tithing.

The very word "tithe" means "one tenth." Tithing was an ancient and general practice among other religions and cultures besides Jews and Christians, but it has been a practice of the Judeo-Christian tradition for thousands of years. Tithing is found in Scripture in several periods of biblical history, from pre-Mosaic times to the days of the early church.

The first mention of the tithe is when Abraham, upon returning from victory over the invading Mesopotamian kings, gave Melchizedek, the king-priest of Salem, a tenth of all the spoils from the war (Gen. 14:18-20). Later, Jacob promised a tithe to God in the event that God helped him to prosper materially (Gen. 28:22).

Under the law of Moses a tithe of the produce of the ground and the livestock was established as an obligation for the people of God to be set aside for the Levites (Lv. 27:30,32). Deuteronomy spelled out that every 3 yrs. a community feast was to be held at the time of the offerings and tithes, and the needy were invited to the celebration as well as the Levites. The widow, the orphan, and the sojourner were also helped through the tithes (Dt. 14:28,29). Offerings were the

portions of sacrifices that were set apart for priests, and they were voluntary gifts for a special purpose (Ex. 25:2-7). In the time of Christ the Pharisees added the practice of tithing even the herbs from their gardens (Mt. 23:23).

When we come to the early church, we find a shift in emphasis with regard to the tithe. It was no longer held as a mandate for the believer, for God has set us free from the requirements of the OT law. Rather, the Christian is urged to give from the heart in gratitude to God for what He has done for us in Christ. Many scholars argue that for the believer, the tithe is only the starting point for giving, and we are called to give our tithes and offerings, gifts above the tithe, to the Lord. It is argued that Jesus had this in mind when He said, "To whom much has been given, much will be required" (Lk. 12:48).

II. The Struggle With Tithing.

It was Luther who said back in the 16th century, "The last part of a person to be converted is his wallet!"² Most of us struggle in the area of allowing God to be Lord of our finances. The same was true for the people in Malachi's day.

Malachi starts off the passage with a call to repentance, and he reminds his readers that though Israel throughout its history had been unfaithful to God, the Lord had not destroyed nor forgotten them. Time and time again they had forsaken Him, yet He remained true and loyal to them. The Lord was full of forgiveness; He still is today.

But then the prophet goes on to challenge the people of Israel to demonstrate their repentance in a specific way. He writes, "*But you ask, 'How are we to return?' Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse - the whole nation of you - because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house" (Mal. 3:7b-10).*

The means by which Malachi urged the Israelites to repent is through giving, and he called them to bring the whole tithe into God's storehouse. The Jews of Malachi's day were withholding the tithes for themselves, and they were spending their money on their own wants and desires. To the extent that they did this, Malachi said they were robbing God.

As you have noticed, we are replacing the floor in Sheldon Jackson Hall. When the workers ripped up the old flooring this week, Ray Casias on our staff discovered some old church bulletins that had fallen through the cracks. The date on the bulletins is 1927! The order of service is printed along with the announcements and some communications from a Building Committee. In 1927 they had a building campaign going on! They were trying to raise funds to construct classrooms for their expanding Sunday School and the University Ministry - in 1927. I believe that the construction resulted in Westminster Hall.

I want to read to you the message from the Building Committee to the congregation from the bulletin dated July 10, 1927 entitled "Paying Our Debts":

"The honest man always pays his debts. He does not want to be known as one who is not willing to meet his obligations. A certain person said to the writer of these words that he was willing to give to the support of the work of the church, but that he had certain debts to pay first. How about his debt to God? Does he not owe anything to Him who has given him everything he has? To be sure we should pay our debts to others, but we should pay our debt to God as well. Or do we pay our debts to others because we think we must, but refuse to pay God bec. we think we can get away with it? Is this honesty? We should be on the square with God.

Many a man will burn a dollar's worth of incense every day on the altar of My Lady Nicotine, and slip God twenty-five cents on Sunday, and fancy that he has paid his debt to Him. Many a woman will spend more money on a single social function, that does herself and no one else any real good, than she does on the work of God in a whole year's time. Is this honesty? The people in the churches need to learn how to give.

God is not a beggar on the street corner with ragged cap in hand into which we can toss our small change. His work should not be looked upon as secondary, and to which we can give or not as we choose. The Man on the Cross said, 'Seek first the Kingdom of God.' Not second, or third, but *first*. How is it with us? Are we paying our honest debts? Are we giving to the current expenses [and the new addition] of this Church as we *can*, and *should*? ...Think it over in the hush, beside the cross, and give as a Christian ought to give."³

That writer could have been Malachi himself! He didn't mince words, did he? And he brought into focus the issue of how we rob God. I don't know what your personal or family finances are like, but I know that in my own house we are careful to give God what we have committed, but very seldom do we give above and beyond that. However, if we have exhausted our funds for entertainment and we want to go out for Chinese food, we don't hesitate to bust the budget. How are you and I robbing God in our giving, in our priorities, in our way of life?

Tithing is a struggle for most of us. Gary Collins told me about a Wizard of Id cartoon this week. A woman with a baby in her arms and her husband are greeting the minister at the conclusion of the worship service at the door. The woman apologizes for all the noise and ruckus they were making during the service and says, "I'm sorry that the baby was crying so loudly; he's must started teething." The minister replies, "That explains why the baby was crying, but why was your husband crying." The woman answered, "He's just started tithing."

III. The Blessing of Tithing.

Have you ever thought of why God desires us to tithe in the first place? Is it because He needs the money and can't get His work done without it? No. The Bible says that God has cattle on a thousand hills. He who created the universe out

of nothing doesn't need our paltry 10 percent. God doesn't need us to tithe; we're the ones who need to tithe.

Malachi writes, *"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. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,' says the Lord Almighty. 'Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,' says the Lord Almighty"* (310b-12).

God challenges the people of Israel to put Him to a test. Bring the full tithe into God's storehouse and see what will happen. The principle He argues here is - you can't outgive God! Whenever I meet with couples for premarital counseling, we talk about family finances, and I challenge them with this passage of Scripture. I suggest to them, and I would suggest to you, if you haven't been tithing before, make a commitment to tithe for the next three months. If after that time, you don't find yourself in as good a situation or better financially and spiritually than you were before, then quit tithing. A pretty bold challenge. I have had couples come back and tell me, "We don't understand it, but we are better off now that we are tithing than we were when we didn't. The refrigerator which was always on the blink and needing repair is working great. The car repair shop told us we didn't need that brake job after all. I got an unexpected raise at work," and so forth. You see, God is a great economist.

Now, does this mean that if I tithe then I will get a Mercedes? No. What it does mean is that God will honor those who honor Him, and He will always look out for His children who seek to walk in His ways. Put God to the test; I challenge you. Bring the whole tithe into God's storehouse, and see what happens.

Conclusion/Application.

God doesn't need the tithe, we are the ones who need to tithe. It is in tithing that

- we are no longer possessed by our possessions;
- we regularly remind ourselves that all we have and are belong to God; we are merely stewards;
- we begin to lay up treasures for ourselves not on earth but in heaven;
- we learn to hold the things of this earth with a loose grip; and
- we use our resources to help the needy and less fortunate, and spread the gospel to places our feet will never travel.

I close with this story. There was a poor worker in Portugal, whom we will call Miguel, and he was an old man. He would make 30 cents a day picking up trash in the streets and selling it to the city. When he got home, he would put 15 cents in a tin can for the church and keep 15 cents for himself. Once when it was suggested to him that he was giving too much and that he should keep more for himself, he replied, "Sir, there are two of us on the job - God and me - and we split the proceeds 50/50!"

I would suggest to you that Miguel is a freer and richer person than most of us in this room! He has a clear understanding of God and his stewardship of the Lord's blessings. Do you? Amen.

¹Source: Dr. Craig Barnes as told in a sermon in 1993.

²Source unknown.

³FPC bulletin, July 10, 1927.