

## The Spirit of the Tithe 11-5-17

### *Malachi 3*

But before we read the Scriptures today I have a question to ask you – a very serious question. I would that you could feel it very personally. Here it is. Do you, do you, do you tithe? It would be interesting if we were all hooked up to heart monitors for that question, just to see what it does to us. Internally, I expect, some of you are going, “Auggghhhh!” I have touched a sensitive nerve because this is an issue about which you feel guilty, or, at least, uneasy. And hey, I am with you. I’m with you. I really would not mind being asked if I tithe. I’m good with that one. But, if I were to sit down with a missionary to poor African tribesmen to go over how I spend my money, and how I give my money, I would feel rather uptight myself. I can relate to your uneasiness. And being a basically non-intrusive guy, I would really not care to ask you one-on-one if you are tithing. But since it is me and the big group here, I am rather less inhibited, and I do believe, with all my heart, that the question is not primarily about your finances. The question is about your heart. It’s about your values, your devotion, your love for Jesus and your faith.

Let’s read the Scriptures on this. Malachi 3:**8-10** *Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 "You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! 10 "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.*

Preachers really like this passage. We like it because it tells people they need to be tithing – giving a tenth or more of their income to the church. And pastors like the idea of more money because money solves some of the problems that plague us. It gets the staff paid and the parking lot paved. It allows us to support those missionaries we love and provide our young people and the youth pastor a special place of their own. It allows us to say “YES” to the vision and dreams of the outreach pastor and the music director. It allows us to encourage the staff with good salaries. It allows us to say “Yes” to the requests of needy friends and needy strangers. You see, the hardest thing about pastoral ministry, at least for me, is not anything that I do – the hardest part of the ministry is the part I never get done due to lack of time, lack of personnel, and lack of funds. So, hey... I won’t kid you here. More dollars in the offering plate makes my job more pleasant, because it makes it a whole lot more effective. So, of course, preachers like Malachi 3 and the

expectation of tithing. If I were inventing a belief system tailored for dynamic church life, tithing would be a key element of the platform. I may even link it to whether you get into heaven, sort of like what Tetzal did which set off Martin Luther and the Reformation.

But, before I am a church leader, I am a theologian, a student and teacher of the word of God. And, in that role, I must be true to the Scriptures and treat them with integrity. That means, for me, that I cannot come to you and say with full conviction that if you are not giving a tenth of your income to our church or your church, you are robbing God. I think that is close to the truth but not quite all the way there. You see, the only clear command to tithe is found in the law of Moses. It is part of the ceremonial law of Old Testament Israel, that part of the law that we believe was fulfilled and finished through the work of Christ. No longer binding on new covenant believers. So, even though I am teaching on tithing today, I am not going to spend long on the letter of the law, because the letter of the law is not at issue for us. But there is still found in this Malachi passage a certain spirit and heart that transcends all dispensations, and is hugely relevant for us who desire to take seriously our Christian discipleship. What does Jesus expect of me, His follower, with respect to the financial support of His church? Does the Old Testament tithing law have anything to say to that question? And my answer to that is, *Absolutely!* The New Testament, or New Covenant did not arise out of nowhere. The Christian church was founded in a Jewish context, an Old Testament context. There were certain things about Christianity that were assumed, since they were part of Old Testament religion. And so, it was understood that God cares about what you do and don't do with your money. It was understood that God expects from His servants that they provide financial support to the formal worship of His people, to the spiritual leaders of His people, and to the needy. In fact, although the God of the Bible has no personal use for our money, He says that when you use it in these ways you are actually giving it to Him. Isn't that what God says in Malachi? He indicates that a failure to support the work of the Old Testament church, as it existed in Israel, was tantamount to robbing Him.

So, we come to the New Testament. And we already know these things about God. We know that worshippers of the true God gave a tithe. Some read the Old Testament to say that they gave, not just a single tithe, but two and a half-tithes, or 23%. We know this is something God has expected. But things are different now. These are new days. The New Covenant is not marked by all the specific rules and ceremonies of the old. It is a simpler covenant, no doubt. But, is there anything in the New Covenant that would make us think that God no longer is interested in His

people giving a significant portion of their income to Him via His church? Is there? I can't think of anything that would suggest such a change. In fact, when I read about the habits of the New Testament believers what do I find? Acts 2:44-45 *All those who had believed were together and had all things in common; 45 and they began selling their property and possessions and were sharing them with all, as anyone might have need.* Woah! The early church movement was marked by a decrease or increase in giving? Were people in the Jerusalem church saying, "Now that we are in the New Covenant we don't have to tithe!" Doesn't sound like it to me at all. Instead, the spirit of the tithe came to full expression in these people. 10%? That was not even an issue, so great was their generosity. Acts 4:34-37 *There was not a needy person among them, for all who were owners of land or houses would sell them and bring the proceeds of the sales 35 and lay them at the apostles' feet, and they would be distributed to each as any had need. 36 Now Joseph, a Levite of Cyprian birth, who was also called Barnabas by the apostles (which translated means Son of Encouragement), 37 and who owned a tract of land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles' feet.*

Fast-forward to the year 2017. How does the story read now? Is it like we find in Acts 4? No, it's not. Nowadays, the average church-goer gives 2.5%. About one in eight is a tither. Good thing we don't say it's mandatory now huh? We have outgrown the old written letter of Old Testament law. But, dear friends, it seems we have "outgrown" the spirit of the tithe as well. We seem to think we have little or no obligation to God anymore. We seem to think that our devotion to the Lord shouldn't cost us anything more than an hour's sleep on Sunday morning, and a token donation. But, is that too harsh? Some of you here are tithers. You are. Praise the Lord! Some of you give more than a tithe. The average church-goer at this church is doing better than 2.5% I am quite sure, maybe double that. But, if you do your math you will see that double 2.5 is what portion of a tithe? Half. I don't know for sure, but I can conjecture that if each of the 200 or so families that regard NPC as their home were to actually give a tenth of their income to our ministry we would have an extra million dollars a year with which to work. That is a staggering figure to me. What we could do with an extra million per year in terms of local ministry, in terms of supporting various missionaries and agencies. That wouldn't be so bad, would it? I mean, Wow! This would be fantastic. Would be, could be. But it isn't --- at least not right now. Why is that? Hmm? Why is that? Why are we not contributing more as a church? Three reasons I will suggest, you see which applies to you, because in the end these corporate figures all rest on your personal decisions.

Reason #1 is a failure of church leadership to either properly teach or inspire. Here is a letter I got from one of our church's leaders. It is in response to us having to make painful choices with our budget. Which good thing will we not do because of lack of funds. This brother writes:

*As far as paying for the staff, I think our fundamental problem with that (and other issues money related) is that we don't tithe as a Church. That being the case, it will always be a problem of robbing from Peter to pay Paul (or however the expression goes). When I first became, a Christian I was in a Church that unashamedly preached occasionally on the tithe as a spiritual indicator. In that, I mean that if you can gratefully, cheerfully, worshipfully give 10% of your gross income to the Church, it is somewhat of an indicator that you truly believe God owns it all and that you are just a steward. I know people cringe when money is addressed from the pulpit, but if we really believe that it is a spiritual principle, it should be taught. I'm not hung up on the 10%, etc., but have been committed to that personally since day one. Malachi talks about robbing God of tithes and offerings. Not the camp that I want to be in.*

What do you think? Have we failed to adequately teach on this? Maybe so, but if so, we are trying to make up lost ground.

The other dimension of leadership failure may be in the area of *vision casting*. *Vision casting*, I find is always easier when the vision includes brick and mortar, land and buildings. It is easy to say, "That is the vision, let's go for it." But now we are not involved with a building project. We are staffed for growth but that means I have no architect models to show you. Casting a vision for effective disciple-making is more difficult. But today, I want to say to you: *Dear Brother, Dear Sister, there is so much to be done, so much we want to do, to grow our body as a contagious community, to raise up children who will stand for Jesus in their generation, to make real disciples who worship, connect and impact. Please come on board and help us in this.* And please don't think other folks will take care of this. Sometimes in a church our size people figure there must be some really rich folks who can get it done. And I'm here to tell you that is stinkin thinkin. It rather reminds me of this picture. Winner of the Arizona department of transportation *Not My Job Award*. Who is supposed to move the roadkill? Somebody else I'm sure. Who is supposed to supply for the ministry of the church? It is you. It is me. We are each called to give. And pardon me, pardon us, if we have not made that clear.

Well, a second reason we aren't giving more as a church, to our church, is that members and friends of NPC are investing their monies in other ministries. Maybe you are giving a tenth of your income away, but it's to Women's Choice Network or Grove City College or three friends who are missionaries. Isn't that legitimate? That's a hard one. Partly, because I don't want to seem selfish, but when our church gives away nearly \$200K per year to other ministries it is hard to feel

too selfish about this. We do support many fine works and it is fine for you to do so too. But, when we read in Acts what folks did with their tithes, they laid them at the apostles' feet. It means they entrusted the leaders of the church to spend those monies as wisdom might lead. They gave to the church. Jesus said to Peter in Matthew 16: **18** *You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.* The God-ordained vehicle for ministry and world-change is the church of Jesus Christ. As we read in the Corinthian epistles it is obvious that monies were collected when the church gathered. Then there is the principle Paul teaches that your financial support should go toward the source of your spiritual care. I am talking about I Corinthians 9: **11-14** *If we sowed spiritual things in you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? 12 If others share the right over you, do we not more? Nevertheless, we did not use this right, but we endure all things so that we will cause no hindrance to the gospel of Christ. 13 Do you not know that those who perform sacred services eat the food of the temple, and those who attend regularly to the altar have their share from the altar? 14 So also the Lord directed those who proclaim the gospel to get their living from the gospel.* I Timothy 5: **17** *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.* Almost every commentator I know says this *honor* involves financial supply. One version translates “double honor” as “respected and paid well.” Why? Next verse. I Timothy 5: **18** *For the Scripture says, "YOU SHALL NOT MUZZLE THE OX WHILE HE IS THRESHING," and "The laborer is worthy of his wages."* The weight of Scripture seems to say that our giving is best done toward the local church of which we are a part.

Now to reason #3 why we aren't giving more as a church. Reason #3 is that our hearts are too bound to the world. There are a hundred ways to say this. We don't care enough about the kingdom of Christ?? We are too distracted?? Pick one. It is all the same point. In his wonderful little book, “The Treasure Principle” Randy Alcorn writes this: *When people tell me they can't afford to tithe, I ask them, "If your income was reduced by 10 percent would you die?" They say, "No." And I say, "Then you've admitted that you can afford to tithe. It's just that you don't want to."* The problem is the **want-to**. And it isn't so much that we don't want to tithe. You probably do want to. It is actually all the other wants that we have. The housing wants and the auto wants and the vacation wants and the clothing wants. Our values are insufficiently sanctified, so that we want all kinds of stuff, nice stuff, not sinful stuff, but stuff that once we pay for leaves us 2.5% that can go to the Lord. I expect that if I say, “Who wants to help our church advance her ministry?”

Who wants to give to make great things happen at North Park?" You probably will think, "Yes, I want to do that." But it's the same reaction you have to half the advertisements commercials you saw and heard last week. And you can't say "yes" to everybody. You must become practiced at saying, "no." No to your kids, no to the salesman, no to the devil and no to your own lusts and cravings. Proverbs 21:**17a** *He who loves pleasure will become a poor man* and he certainly won't be a giver. That little word "no" is often the key to freedom. It is the key to economic freedom because the ability to say, "No" to unwise purchases will free you up to say, "Yes" to the things God wants you to do.

Now, in case you are wondering if Pastor Dan is preaching on this right now for some particular reason you can't see, the answer is, "Yes." Maybe you got a letter from the church on a stewardship initiative we are calling, *Heart and Treasure*. We are praying for God to work through His word and Spirit among us in such a way that we would see a dramatic upswing in financial support for our mission. Our goal is to see giving increase by \$10,000 per month. And we are appealing to you to do your part. Listen, I tried other ways. I went to other sources to see what I could do. I visited wealthy athletes. But no go. I tried my contacts in the entertainment industry, but got very little there. I spoke to people of influence. People I felt had connections, but that wasn't enough. I even turned to the federal government for help. But you know what? None of that is God's plan. The spirit of tithing tells us that God's plan involves you. It involves every single worshipper of the Lord, contributing according to his or her ability. And contributing, not under compulsion, but out of love and joy. The tithe, under the old covenant, was a legal obligation. It was an obligation to a loving God. It was an obligation that carried with it a great promise of blessing. But in our context, we see giving to the ministry of the church as a gospel privilege. We aren't sitting back saying, "Well, if I give to God, maybe He will do something for me." Instead, we are saying, "Wow, look at what Jesus has given!" When we give up something precious to us, that becomes a genuine token of our faith, of our love, and of our conviction that the kingdom of God is where real life is to be found.

If you are not a part of this church, I hope we said something this morning you will find helpful or informative or challenging. I would much rather have spent all our time telling you about Jesus Christ, about how He lived and died in our place, about how He rose and reigns and gives to all who believe a quality of life that is beyond compare. You see, our faith is all about responding to Jesus. If He is the one whose love has won our hearts, then giving 10 or 20 or 30% is

not an expression of lunacy, but of love. And we do it gladly because we really think there is nothing more important than people discovering the riches of God in Christ. We hope you will discover that too.

So, let's take our final few minutes together pondering what Christ has done for us. We do that through what we call the Lord's Supper. We do it so we never forget Jesus. The Bible tells us a whole lot about Him. Here is a relevant passage as we consider the calling of God on us to give and even to tithe for His pleasure and glory. II Corinthians 8:**9** *For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sake He became poor, so that you through His poverty might become rich.* Let's pray and prepare our hearts to commune with Christ.