

HEART FOR GOD
(1) EXERCISE FOR A HEALTHY HEART

Malachi 3: 6-12
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November 9, 2008

PROLOGUE

In one of the installments of the popular comic strip “Dilbert” the character known as Dogbert is explaining to Dilbert that he wants to start a new religion. He says:

I decided to start a discount religion. The tithing would only be 5% and I’d let people sin as much as they wanted. The only problem is that I don’t want to spend time with anyone who would join that sort of religion.

PREFACE

The prophet Malachi lived at a time when the people of God had been restored from exile. They received blessing upon blessing from God including the freedom to return home. Yet for all this they remained selfish and spiritually bankrupt. Malachi’s God-inspired solution was not more prayer or more study but something both unexpected and overlooked.

SCRIPTURE

For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. {7} Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, "How shall we return?" {8} Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! {9} You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me--the whole nation of you! {10} Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. {11} I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. {12} Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts (Malachi 3:6-12 NRSV).

INTRODUCTION

When I was in college, my home church called a new pastor. He was married and had three children. The eldest child was named Brad. Today Brad is a successful engineer in California but when he was younger he was quite a character. One Sunday, when I was back from school, I was sitting next to Brad. It came time for the offering. The ushers came down the aisle. Suddenly Brad leaned over and grabbed my necktie and yanked me toward one of the ushers. I let out a yelp but he looked at me with indignation and declared, “My Dad said put in

your ties and offerings!”

To be sure, Pastor Wentzel did say something similar to that. But it was not “ties and offerings” rather it was “tithes and offerings.” This is something the people of God have been doing for more than four millenia.

The word tithe comes from an Old English word meaning a "tenth part" or "10%". I suppose technically we should call it “tenting” but that sounds like a back packer with a speech impediment. (“Oh, yeth, we like to go ‘tenting’ on the weekend.”)

The practice of tithing is a form of giving that means returning to God 10% of what one has earned or produced. For example, if you earned \$30,000 a tithe would be \$3,000. But in a sense we cannot give God a tithe, or any other proportion for that matter, since he already owns it. At best, when we are giving a tithe, we are allowing God’s grace to transform that one tenth into something that honors God, advances his Kingdom, and helps bind our lives to his service. It is a kind of spiritual exercise that leads to a healthy heart for God.

1. EXERCISE FOR A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD

Tithing is a spiritual EXERCISE that can contribute to A HEALTHY RELATIONSHIP WITH GOD. God says:

“Return to me and I will return to you” (3:7).

Malachi was dismayed by his own people’s indifference to the things of God. So he sought through provocative language and rhetorical questions to evoke in his people a return to the Lord. Malachi believed that the pathway to spiritual reformation must include material restitution of that which belongs to God. He knew that hearts full of greed would have no room for the Lord. He urged people to resume the biblical practice of tithing because he knew that as their giving went so went their hearts. Not that tithing obligates God to accept us. Rather it is a response to God’s undeserved invitation to welcome us back.

Many people have difficulty associating money with spirituality. Yet not only is this the message of the prophets it is also precisely what Jesus teaches us. Sixteen of Jesus’ thirty-eight parables refer to the faithful management of finances. He repeatedly portrayed our approach to money as a primary determiner of our heart’s spiritual condition. He said:

"Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also." (Matthew 6:19-21 NIV).

Tithing is a practical, time-honored, and God-inspired means for making sure our hearts are in

the right place. In one of the many passages that describe tithing, the Bible says:

"The purpose of tithing is to teach you to put God first in your life" (Deut. 14:23 paraphrased).

When you tithe you are reminding yourself that God is on the throne. Not you. Not your money. As such, tithing can liberate us from being chained to our possessions. It can free us from the monster of "more." It is a tool whereby we can master our money instead of our money mastering us.

Tithing reinforces the truth that all that we have comes from God. Tithing is not a tip for good service. God is the Owner. We are the servers. The tithe is sacred:

"A tithe of everything...belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD" (Lev 27:30 NIV).

Over and over again we are told that God reserves one part in order to remind us that all parts belong to him. One day in seven is reserved for God to remind us that all days belong to God. In the Garden of Eden one tree was reserved for God to remind us that all trees belong to God. In the Promised Land one city was reserved for God to remind the Israelites that all cities belong to God. One tenth of all that we have is sacred to God and is a reminder that all we have belongs to God.

In the late 70's and early 80's there was a hugely popular religious bumper sticker campaign that featured these words:

"Honk if you love Jesus"

You could see these bumper stickers all over the place, almost to the point of being nauseating. I was ever so grateful when some clever soul came out with this variation:

"If you love Jesus - tithe. Any goose can honk!"

2. EXERCISE FOR A HEALTHY MINISTRY FOR GOD

Tithing is a spiritual EXERCISE that can contribute to A HEALTHY MINISTRY FOR GOD. God says:

"Bring the full tithe into the storehouse" (3:10).

The storehouse was part of the temple in Jerusalem. The tithe was brought to the place of worship and used not only to provide for worship but also for the ongoing work of the Levites. We continue to follow this principle today. Tithing enables us to become partners with God. We participate in God's practical plan for supporting his work in the world.

Unfortunately, many think that a stewardship program in the local church is raising money much as community agencies raise money. There was a young man who was not too well-educated and his manner was somewhat crude and rough, but he became a Christian and was on fire for the Lord. He constantly pestered his pastor to help him be of some genuine service to the church. In desperation, the pastor put him on the finance committee and gave him a list of 10 people, saying:

“These are members who are behind in their giving and seldom attend services; some are prominent people of the city. Contact them any way you can and try to get them to be more faithful. Use the church stationery to write letters if you want.”

He accepted the challenge with enthusiasm. About three weeks later, a letter arrived from a prominent physician, whose name was on the list. In the envelope was a two thousand dollar check and a note:

“Dear Pastor: Enclosed is my check to make up for my missed offerings. I’m sorry for missing worship so much, but be assured I am going to be present every Sunday from now on and will not by choice miss any services again. Sincerely, Milton. B. Jones, M.D. P.S. Would you kindly tell your secretary that there is only one *t* in *dirty* and no *c* in *skunk*.”

First Presbyterian’s stewardship ministry is a conscious effort to separate stewardship from fund raising. Fund raising focuses on the need of an organization to receive funds. Stewardship focuses on the need of the giver to give, as Jesus consistently taught.

When Christians understand the biblical concept of stewardship, they will not only give liberally to God but also spend the remaining funds in a way that is faithful to God’s purpose and plan for their lives. As a result, the Kingdom will prosper and the church will grow.

3. EXERCISE FOR A HEALTHY RELIANCE UPON GOD

Tithing is a spiritual EXERCISE that can contribute to A HEALTHY RELIANCE UPON GOD. God says:

“Put me to the test...see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing” (3:10).

This is the only place in Scripture where we are invited to test the goodness of God. It is as if God came down to our level and said, “Look, you don’t seem to understand this tithing business. So let me put it this way. Just try this and see if I do not out give you. See if I do not overwhelm you with blessing upon blessing.”

Does this mean that if you tithe you will never be sick, never suffer loss, never have a family crisis, and your checking account will look like you won the lottery? No, of course not. Nevertheless, over the course of your life, in countless ways, God will work in the circumstances of your life to bless you in ways you would not have been blessed if you had not taken up his challenge.

If tithing is new to you, you may want to work at in increments. You can grow towards the Biblical standard of tithing (10%) by one percent of income each year. For example: if you are currently giving 2% of your income to the church, you would increase your giving to 3% in 2009 and 4% in 2010 and so on. This approach seeks to encourage you as disciples of Christ to take the next

step in your journey of faith and to live life in reliance upon God.

I must tell you that few things have had more impact on my walk with God than the decision to tithe. But I am not one who teaches that if you tithe God will magically solve all your problems including all your financial problems. Tithing can be a struggle and involve real sacrifice. But through this struggle we learn to rely upon God to meet our needs and grow closer to him. We receive blessings on earth and treasures in heaven. Who could ask for more?

CONCLUSION

Tithing is a spiritual exercise that leads to a healthy heart for God.

- Does God require Christians to tithe? No.
- Does God want us to tithe? Yes.
- Will God bless us if we tithe? Most definitely.

I am well aware these are financially troublesome times. But I am reminded of the words of James L. Kraft, founder of the company that bears his name, who consistently gave more than a tithe of his income to Christian causes for many years, and who said:

"The only investment I ever made which has paid consistently increasing dividends is the money I have given to the Lord."