

This Sermon was written by Rev. Gary Smith for the First Congregational Church

This Matter of Giving

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Malachi 3:8-12; 2 Corinthians 9:6-12

This morning I bring to you one of the most controversial subjects in the life of the church, money. I may be preaching to the choir though for I saw in the financial report that this congregation is above average in its giving. Traditionally, churches that have an annual pledge drive do better than congregations that ask for money on a continual basis. Instead of pleading for money regularly, this congregation seeks estimates of giving for the next year and then forms a balanced budget. You and your leadership have done well, but I would like to share with you insights from our scriptures about stewardship.

The prophet Malachi's words seem harsh and judgmental and hardly reflect or represent our attitudes towards giving our offerings. Malachi does raise an issue for us to contemplate, the tithe. I have refrained from preaching on this subject and I will tell you why.

The tithe speaks of legalism. One thing this church is not is legalistic. We love freedom of religion and private interpretation of Scripture. At first glance Malachi might give us the impression that if one obeys the law, gives 10% of their income, then their obligation to God is fulfilled and they can go do as they like, even live an irresponsible life. There is also sometimes a self-righteous attitude among those who tithe and push tithing, like they have arrived and the rest of us don't measure up. Tithing is also abused by preachers. It is used as a club to beat people over the head. I've witnessed some who manipulated their audiences into giving 10% with promises of wealth to the giver.

I hesitate to preach on tithing because it is a controversial topic in the life of the church and people's feelings are very sensitive when it comes to money. One of our clergy met with his board to discuss the poor financial condition of the church and challenged them as leaders and mentors of the faith to tithe. One member threw up his hands and said, "If I have to tithe to be on this board, I'm out of here" and he left the meeting and the church.

The mention of tithing is so sensitive that we ministers seldom say the word. This may be because even in the hiring process we don't discuss it. In the search hiring committees I have faced, I have been asked if I believed in the virgin birth, if

Jonah and the whale was true, been asked about my marriage and family life, my ethics and if I had a criminal background, but I have never been asked if I was a tither.

Now I want to put you at ease, we at First Congregational practice, “don’t ask, don’t tell”, when it comes to finances. Only the financial secretary knows what anyone gives and he is not sharing information. But before we throw away this ancient giving practice, as having no relevance in our modern day, let us look at its history. We associate tithing with the Old Testament practice of giving 10% to God. It actually is older than the Bible. According to Christopher and Mather in their book, Holy Smoke! Whatever Happened to Tithing?, the Babylonians and Egyptians gave 10% to their gods. In the Greek legend of Hercules, his oxen were stolen and when returned, he built an altar in Rome and asked the Romans to tithe as an expression of appreciation.

Christopher and Mather cite William McGovern’s book, Military Strategies of Antiquities that claims that in Egyptian numerology the number 10 was a sacred and powerful number. It represented wholeness and completeness. Soldiers who modeled perfection in their uniform and temperament were called a “Perfect 10.” Now you know where we got the idea of numbering people and things “She’s a ten.” “The car’s a ten.” “Your next minister’s a ten.”

In the Old Testament the purpose of tithing was varied. It was given for many causes including: building of the temple, welfare assistance of the poor and as a religious tax to benefit the faith. Because of their agricultural community, they tithed their first fruits and crops: grain, wine, olive oil, cattle, sheep, goats, etc. Tithing was a symbol of their genuine worship. It was not a payoff to keep God giving to them, but a concrete sign of the importance of their relationship to God.

The prophet Malachi is the most quoted of all passages in the Bible about tithing. He is addressing those who have fallen away from the faith and failing to tithe was a symptom of that alienation. In our present day understanding, one’s giving to God is part and partial of our worship and our relationship with God. In the Hebrew understanding of religious obligations, giving of a tithe was an appropriate first step in demonstrating one’s faith and commitment.

Another problem with Malachi’s discourse is the misunderstanding of “testing God.” Some advocate that if we tithe God will bless us materially and make us rich. Robbie and I attended a different denomination one Sunday where the minister said that he had opened another savings account because when he gave his

tithe he believed that God was going to fill his new bank account with money. He didn't explain how this would be accomplished. According to the Interpreter's Bible Commentary, the Scripture is not about private, individual wealth. Rather it is about a community that shares its resources so that everyone is blessed and has enough. It may be that the prophet is saying that those who tithe have different priorities, are measuring what matters to them and are concerned about the well being of others.

You may be saying, "That's fine but that's the Old Testament view." We are a New Testament church under the covenant of grace not the law and I thank God and Jesus Christ that we are. In our tradition we often ask, "What did Jesus say, in this instance, about the tithe?" I recall Jesus telling the story of the self-righteous Pharisee and the tax collector in the temple. The Pharisee prayed, "Lord, I thank you that I am not like other men, robbers, evildoers, adulterers or this tax collector. I fast twice a week and give a tenth of all I have." But the tax collector stood at a distance. He would not even look up to heaven, but beat his breast and said, "God have mercy on me a sinner." Jesus said the tax collector not the Pharisee was accepted by God. This story has frightened us from publicly discussing the spiritual discipline of tithing for fear of being self-righteous, or prideful. Jesus did not dismiss the practice of the tithe but he did dismiss the attitude of some who felt superior for tithing.

A similar story is found in Matthew 23:23, "Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites. You give a tenth of your spices, mint, dill, and cumin but you have neglected the more important matters of the law, justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter without neglecting the former." Jesus did not discredit or dismiss tithing but Jesus was opposed to practices that were ends in themselves. Can you imagine a Christian who tithed but was unjust, condemnatory and unfaithful to what he/she believed? What good would tithing do for such a life? It is hypocritical.

I propose that tithing is a spiritual discipline relevant for Christians today not just so that the church has more money but for the spiritual well being of the giver.

More often than not a tither is a better steward of all his/her resources. This makes some sense; if we are making such a commitment, then we have to live by a budget to make ends meet. There is much truth in the expression, "careless giving results in careless living." Tithers, it has been suggested, bring their economic lives under discipline. One member shared with me that her family turned their household financial situation around when they began tithing.

Today we are often surprised to hear that someone tithes. This is not a contemporary surprise. In the fourth century John Chrysostom preached to the Church, "Jews contributed tithes...now, however we are wont(surprised) to hear so and so (tithes) gives tithes...what among the Jews was no matter of astonishment or celebrity has now among Christians become a matter of surprise." (Christopher & Mather, Holy Smoke...)

One of my former church members was talking to a co-worker over the water fountain at work about charitable giving. When she mentioned she tithed, her co-worker said,

"I didn't know that you belonged to The Church."

"I'm a member of the Red Rock Christian Church," our member responded.

"I didn't know they required you to tithe."

"They don't. I choose to."

We at First Congregational tell no one what they must give. It is between you and your Lord. We do highlight what the Bible says about giving. According to the Apostle Paul in 2 Corinthians, your giving should be proportionate to your blessings. It should be given regularly. and it ought to be done cheerfully. "For God loves a cheerful giver," but the good news is, God also accepts a grouch. Our giving is our response to God for God's love given us. Our giving needs to reflect our growth in grace. As your gratitude for the gift of Jesus Christ and love for God increases so should your offering.

Thank you in advance for your offering.