

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 (NRSV)

²⁸Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; ²⁹the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

Malachi 3:6-12 (NRSV)

⁶For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. ⁷Ever 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?"

⁸Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰Bring 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. ¹¹I 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. ¹²Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

2 Corinthians 8:1-7 (The Message)

Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.

This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives. That's what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the relief offering to your attention, so that what was so well begun could be finished up. You do so well in so many things—you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're passionate, you love us—now, do your best in this, too.

*God desires voluntary and cheerful givers. But what is God's expectation for our giving?
Are God's Old Testament teachings about tithing meant for us too?*

These passages are all about money – right? Yes and no. Money is the immediate subject at hand, but the real issues, lying just beneath the surface, are love and trust. God's love for us. Our love for God. Our love for one another. Our trust in God.

So often, it seems that as soon as the word "tithe" is uttered, thoughts and feelings turn to "obligation" and "pre-tax or after-tax." But if we are going to grasp the message from Malachi, we have to go back to the basics.

A cheerful and generous giver

God created us out of love, not necessity. We were created to love -- specifically, to love God (Deut. 6:4) and to love our neighbor (Lev. 19:18). As Jesus explained to the lawyer (Luke 10:27), this love is the essence of God's teachings. Further, these loving relationships are to be expressed in faithfulness, in trust. The biblical story is of a God who is utterly faithful to his people even though they run away from God far more often than they walk toward him. It is faith and faith alone that puts us in a right relationship with God.

In today's passage from Malachi, God reaches out yet again, "Return to me and I will return to you" (3:6). Despite the people's ongoing abandonment of God and the ways of God, he still pursues them, unwilling to abandon them. When Malachi brings the charge that the people are robbing God, the unpaid tithe is only a surface issue. God's people rob God when they (we!) deny God their prayers and praise. We rob God when we skip worship. We

rob God when we ignore those in need. We rob God when we water down the truth about God. We rob God when we fail to proclaim the Good News of God's Son.

As Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth about their participation in the collection for the poor among the believers in Jerusalem, he not only reminds them that "God loves a

Rev. Michael Reeves on Tithing

"When a group of friends or family or co-workers want to pitch in to get a gift for someone for a birthday or anniversary, the normal reaction is to determine how much everyone needs to contribute. This is a common experience in today's culture. When it comes to the same kind of conversation in our church relationship, we bring a variety of backgrounds and experiences with us that condition our response. If we came from a more conservative religious background like Baptist or Pentecostal we might be more familiar with the expectation and understanding of tithing. If we come from a more liturgical background like Episcopal or Catholic, we might have less of an understanding of a specific financial expectation. And if we come from a non-religious background, we might have an understanding of giving from our experience in the United Way where the concept of giving a 'fair share' is taught. Whatever point of view we bring to the table, we need to become clear on what St Andrew and biblical expectations are as we determine our individual response."

"The United Methodist Church and St Andrew has determined that the biblical expectation for giving of a disciple is to tithe. Tithe means giving a tenth of annual income. You can look at the adjusted gross income figure on your last tax return and move the decimal one place to the left and that would represent a tithe. The question is often asked whether we should tithe on the gross or net of our income and whether the tithe should be given to the church or can it be given to other charities as well. Some ask if tithing is still a biblical guideline for our time. While these are questions that must be determined individually, the sad reality is that the average United Methodist gives about 2% of their adjusted gross income placing us near the bottom of most comparative charts with other denominations. We certainly have room to grow in our giving."

cheerful giver" but he encourages them toward the generosity that marks a loving heart. Paul lifts up to them the example of the struggling Christians in Macedonia whose "abundant joy" and "extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity." There is no sense of obligation, no struggling with "pre-tax" or "post-tax." There is only generosity pouring out of changed hearts. And through it all, Paul points the Corinthians to the example of Christ: "For you know the generous act of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that by his poverty you may become rich" (2 Cor. 8:9). My own generosity with my money, even if I gave away all that I possess, would still pale next to Jesus' willingness to be nailed to that cross.

But is it a bargain struck?

It's a mistake to read a passage like today's from Malachi as some sort of tit-for-tat bargain between God and his people. Pay the tithe and I'll reward you with lots of blessings. Send in your money and you'll get that promotion or new job.

As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, "That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to 'bring the full tithe' (v. 10). Motivating and accompanying all true gifts to God is the pouring out of our life, our love, our all. And when we so present ourselves, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, it is surely true that heaven's richest bounties are heaped upon us. . . . We find ourselves given graces anew every morning, too numerous to count—the glories of a good creation; joy in daily work; patience, kindness, self-control in the fellowship we have with one another; release from guilt and anxiety and dread of death; and above all, peace with God, who winds us round and round with mercy, as if with air. The Kingdom's goal—the glory of God—becomes our chief occupation, and we find all these other things added to us as well."

Isn't the tithe just an Old Testament practice?

No. The biblical tithe was woven into the religious practices of God's people. There were offerings and taxes for a variety of purposes. But the tithe was for sacred purposes, given for God's priests, for the temple, and some even for the poor. Jesus didn't set aside the tithe. Why would he? Granted Jesus took to task those who prided themselves on tithing even of their spices while ignoring the larger matters of loving God and neighbor (Matthew 23:23-24). But Jesus kept God's Law and would certainly have given his tithe, as would have Peter, Andrew, and the rest. Not out of pride or obligation. They would have given out their love for God, knowing that their giving was the incarnation of their faith.

Applying the Biblical Teachings on Tithing – Reflections by Rev. Michael Reeves

“There are some necessary observations as we begin to make application of this lesson to our lives. First, tithing is neither the threshold for giving for most people nor should it be a ceiling. Working toward the tithe, committing to the tithe, and giving beyond the tithe represent the journey of financial responsibility for a disciple. Most people who give to the church give to other worthy causes as well. Giving a tenth of annual income is not the maximum from which all giving should be determined. The question here is not what the minimum expectation is, but understanding the biblical expectation. Multiple tithes were given in the Old Testament in a time of an impoverished nation with a tax burden. We live in a time of the greatest explosion of discretionary income in the history of the world. It is hard in these circumstances to rationalize giving less to the church than a tithe. The practical issue is how we manifest our priorities. If we spend or commit through personal indebtedness our discretionary income to our personal consumption, then we start to develop a theology of scarcity. We inevitably begin thinking about giving from what is left over, not the first fruits of our labor. While churches have often expressed their ‘need’ for funding, the motivation for giving in our Methodist belief system is that giving is a part of our discipleship.”

“There are also some personal expressions that are generally not biblical or helpful. One is to designate tithing to specific projects or ministries. That action suggests a lack of trust in church leadership and in God to direct. The practical issue is that few designations come in for things like utilities, insurance and custodial service. Another curious response is the idea of ‘withholding’ the tithe because of a point of disagreement about something within the community of faith. The guidelines for solving conflict are found in Matthew 18 and there is not a biblical basis for such withholding. Finally, St Andrew has a finance committee of lay leaders nominated and elected each year in accordance with the Book of Discipline that provides oversight. The financial staff manage the daily financial operations and an independent audit is completed every year and is available for review upon request.”

READING WITH HEART & MIND, OCT 28 – NOV 3

Sunday, 1 Samuel 24 After being relentlessly pursued by Saul, David foregoes the opportunity to kill Saul. He is dismayed at himself for even considering the possibility. What do you think this reveals about David’s heart? What does this story say about how we should act towards those who seek to harm us?

Monday, 1 Samuel 25 Samuel dies. A woman, Abigail, has to restrain David’s desire for bloody revenge for an insult. What do you think is the moral of this story? Is there a moral at all? What does it reveal about David? About Abigail? What is revealed here about God? Why do you think that so much time is spent on the telling of this story?

Tuesday, 1 Samuel 27:1-28:2 David marries Abigail. David seeks refuge by serving the king of Achish. Many Christians, me included, have a very difficult time with passages such as this. David’s bloodthirsty seems endless. “Leaving neither man nor woman alive”? This story reflects the ruthlessness of the times and warns us that David is no saint.

Wednesday, 1 Samuel 28:3-25 Saul is a despairing, beaten man. Out of his fear on the eve of battle with the Philistines, he turns to pagan practices of black magic. This is the end of Saul’s era.

Thursday, 1 Samuel 29 Though David and his men are ready to fight *with* the Philistines against Saul, the Philistine lords don’t trust him and send him away. Do you notice that everything seems to work out for David? Here, he doesn’t have to fight against his fellow Israelites and yet hasn’t betrayed the king of Achish. How would you explain David’s good fortune? Is it fortune or is it God at work?

Friday, 1 Samuel 30 After a successful rescue mission, David declares a new equity in the distribution of booty. What is David’s principle? How does this compare to Jesus’ parable about the workers and wages in Matthew 20:1-16?

Saturday, 1 Samuel 31 Bruce Birch suggests that the only appropriate response to this passage is communal silence and grieving, resisting the temptation to explain. Do you agree? Why is it so hard to avoid seeking explanations in the midst of tragedy?

Sermon Notes

Higher Choices – Finding Purpose through Spiritual Gifts

A one day workshop with Laura Zuber, Sat., Nov 10

Begin now to build a successful life that honors God and takes you on a wonderful journey of loving, laughing, growing, creating, and experiencing all of God's blessings. Higher Choices™ are the wisest, best choices for you to be consistent with God's will for you and the life God's enabling you to co-create. They are the points at which you and God connect, and you decide to follow. Learn practical tools for self-discovery and action to know your destination, chart the course, and navigate life's twists and turns.

This Saturday workshop with Laura Zuber will be held on Sat., November 10, from 9-2. Lunch will be provided. To register, please go to www.thebibleacademy.com. Childcare is available and reservations can be made when you register for the workshop.

Hold the date!! Diane Ackerman on Wed., Nov 7, at 7pm

Ms. Ackerman will be the second best-selling author coming to St. Andrew. Her latest book is *The Zookeeper's Wife*, a true story about husband and wife zookeepers of the Warsaw Zoo who save 300 Jews from the Holocaust – hiding them in the zoo! She will speak at 7pm in Wesley Hall.

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Michael Reeves has provided us with some very thought-provoking questions about faith and money. Any of these could generate a lively and fruitful discussion. Use them in your classes, small groups, or even over dinner!

1. The benevolent giving of a church, or giving to ministry which reaches beyond the immediate congregation, can be described as a measure of selflessness of the church. Is my church unselfish? What leads me to my conclusion?
2. How is my life richer in the things money cannot buy than it was a year ago?
3. What is the most radical insight into money that God has led me to understand?
4. From where did my blessings come?
5. What is a good balance between *impulse* and *discipline* in matters of giving?
6. When and why do I most enjoy giving?
7. Why do I want to give to support my church?
 - To express gratitude to God for the blessings I have received
 - To add meaning to my life and make me feel good
 - To continue my family tradition of giving
 - To leave a legacy
 - To honor someone
 - To support a special ministry in the future