

SERMON TITLE- "Should We Give? The New Testament View"

TEXT- Hebrews 7

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This is the last sermon on the question of, "Should we give?" I hope that I have made it clear that the command to tithe is based on the fact that "the earth is the Lord's."

I hope I have shown that the foundation of tithing rises out of stewardship. It is from this that the very simple, easy to understand OT command comes-

A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. Leviticus 27:30

That's pretty simple and easy to calculate. For those who take that at face value- their financial lives are not controversial.

But there is another very important piece to this puzzle- today I want to add the 3rd piece and it surrounds the question of the NT. Maybe tithing is just an OT command. Let me explain. As with the first 2 parts of this series, the principles reach into many other areas of life.

But it starts here-

The Bible Has Two Parts- The Old And New Testaments

The Bible is divided into 2 parts- the OT and the NT. Understanding that there are 2 parts is vital to understanding the Bible at all. The Bible is one book, but being one book how the parts work together matters a lot. Using the example of a car, both the gas tank and the radiator need to be topped up with fluids- but if you don't understand the difference it will be a disaster for you and your car.

There is a difference between the OT and NT that is defined by the Bible itself. The OT was defined by a written law. The Law described what our relationship with God should look like. The story of the OT is the failure of people to live up to the standards that they had promised. It is also the story of the disasters that followed from that failure.

The NT is the story of God's fresh beginning that comes with Jesus. The shift from OT to NT was talked about in the OT in several places and beautifully in Jeremiah- **"This is the covenant I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the LORD. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people."** Jeremiah 31:33

Jesus came to write God's Law on our hearts but that meant that the role of the old Law suddenly changes. In the NT the symbol of that change came dramatically when the curtain in the temple tears from top to bottom when Jesus dies.

Understanding The Parts Interprets The Laws

Even while Jesus was on the teaching phase of His life on earth, the controversy swirled around what parts of the OT carried forward and which parts did not. The controversy began immediately.

The controversy continued after Jesus left His followers with the task of carrying on His mission.

One of the most famous of the discussions around this matter is described in Acts

15. There were several OT laws that seemed non-negotiable. The matters of circumcision and of unclean foods topped the list. In the case the church held a council and it was decided that these laws do not carry forward.

The distinction that was made was- God gave the descendants of Abraham, the nation of Israel certain laws- that do not apply to the people of the New Covenant. Almost all Christians recognize this and it is one of the reasons that the Church does not practice stoning.

But the OT has 100s of laws so the debate was not finished and to some degree it carries on.

In regard to tithing it is often suggested that just as circumcision and unclean food do not carry forward- tithing does not carry forward. That argument says that, since “the earth is the Lord’s” and we are Kingdom people- we no longer need to worry about 10% but simply should give as the need and the conviction of the Holy Spirit direct us. We no longer live under a specific law.

Of course, no one would argue that Kingdom people shouldn’t give- the argument comes on the matter of whether it is to be a tithe.

It isn’t a silly argument.

I still remember when the light went on for me that tithing is also a NT principle.

I was doing a study in the Book of Hebrews and came across this passage-

This Melchizedek was king of Salem and priest of God Most High. He met Abraham returning from the defeat of the kings and blessed him, and Abraham gave him a tenth of everything. Hebrews 7:1-2

In Hebrews the writer talks about the connections between the OT and the NT very directly, saying for example

The former regulation is set aside because it was weak and useless (for the law made nothing perfect), and a better hope is introduced, by which we draw near to God. Hebrews 7:18-19

In spite of this the writer draws in the matter of the tithe to illustrate the way God works in the world.

And it struck me that the tithe is presupposed by the writer of Hebrews and the Christians of the NT. The tithe is not a law given to a people- it is a law given to all of humanity. Because of that the people of the Kingdom know it is right- just as they know that integrity, justice and mercy are the marks of those who acknowledge the Creator of the Universe to be their Master.

The Tithe Is Presupposed In The New Testament

This is very important because one of the big explanations of tithing and how it works in the lives of God’s people now applies very directly to us.

It is the famous passage in Malachi- the very last book of the OT. In it tithing is explained.

“I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty. “But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’” Malachi 3:6-7

#1. God Does Not Change

This is an important principle alongside of the fact that in life everything changes. Not only does everything change- it means that how we respond to God's instructions changes with each shift in culture.

That is a very important thing to remember because over the course of time, God's people go from being wandering nomad, to a large clan, to a people in captivity, to a season wandering around in the desert, to a nation with a spectacular temple, to a people in captivity, and finally, when Jesus arrives- a people who land is occupied.

That is a lot of changes and with each change massive adjustments were needed.

But God does not change- and in the case of Malachi's argument His changelessness is demonstrated by the fact that through all of Israel's twists and turns in relationship to God- He has not abandoned His people.

I think you know where this is going with reference to the tithe.

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. Malachi 3:8-9

#2. Tithing Is Important And Easily Missed

What looks quite plain here is, that the people that Malachi is addressing missed these 2 points.

1. Tithing Isn't Optional. They did not think tithing was important, ie it was not "robbing" God of His due.

It is easy to think about tithing kind of like giving when a crisis hits or even passing a few dollars to a homeless person on the street. These things just seem right and using the example of Haiti- it is just plain the right thing to do to dig into our pockets and give to a nation that has been devastated.

It feels good and it is good- but it isn't tithing as the Bible describes it.

Tithing is not a response to a need- tithing is paying God's rents. It is not fixing the roof or unplugging the sewers. Those are critically important and failing to take care for crises leads to its own disasters. But these are not to be confused with paying the landlord the rents.

It goes to the explanation of stewardship that we looked at last week. We are not the owners of the earth- we have been placed here as stewards. As stewards of tenants- we owe something to the owner- we owe Him the rent. Not paying the rent is stealing from the landlord. There is no other way to put it.

The voice of God in Malachi is the voice of the Landowner speaking to His tenants and asking why the rent checks have stopped coming in.

In modern terms the Landowner provides the heat and light and tells His tenants that the heat and light have been cut off until the rent is paid.

The bottom line is- if the tenants fail to pay rent- consequences come.

In the system that God set up, it is not the landlord who is to go knocking on doors every month, to collect the checks, it is the tenants who are to deliver their rent on the appropriate days.

Because of this system-

2. They found it easy to slough off their obligations.

If there is no landlord knocking on the door every month then just ignoring paying the rent is the easiest thing in the world to become habitual.

No prudent steward would even let that happen- but no wise person would ever take the dues due the Master for granted.

The nation of Israel, however, as a group had let their obligations go seriously in arrears.

And now they were under the curse. That is a terrible state of affairs.

#3. What About The Curse?

This is a very important point. If failing to tithe brought us under a curse, that should rightly scare the lethargy out of most people and a church that could convince its members that failing to tithe brought on a curse will likely either have very few members or very healthy giving.

Malachi may well have been written about 400 years before Jesus came to earth and by that time the Jewish teachers were taking Malachi's words very seriously. By then they now had listed off all kinds of details of how the tithe should be calculated- to the point where Jesus used how they did so as an example of the abuse of the Law.

Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone. Luke 11:42

Why were they so careful not to miss anything that could fall under the tithe? Because they were terrified of falling under the curse. The result was that the temple, in Jesus' time was a spectacular sight again.

The NT does not leave any room for ambiguity on this point. Paul writes, first of all that-

All who rely on observing the law are under a curse, for it is written: "Cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the Book of the Law." Galatians 3:10

Every Israeli would know what Paul is talking about here. The Law was simply- obey or be cursed.

But just as clear is the Gospel message-

Christ redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us . . . Galatians 3:13

This understanding of the curse of the Law is one of the reasons that those misguided people who declared that one of the reasons for the Haiti earthquake was God's judgment.

Is that where we are supposed to go? No! It is why these teachers are way out of line. The curses of the OT came to an end with the cross.

The whole story of the cross and resurrection, the story of redemption- is that we are no longer under the curse.

We have all treated God's Laws as optional.

We have all sloughed off the obligations we know we owe.

We have all even defied God's Laws at times.

This means that we are under the curse- a horrible place to be- but that Jesus came to free us from that.

By accepting Him as our advocate, we have been freed from the curse and don't

live with that terror.

I suspect that it is this knowledge that has taken a good deal of urgency out of the matter of the tithe for Kingdom people. Our Landlord has, with Jesus' death declared that the curses of the Law no longer apply.

So we don't have to worry about the curses so does that mean that we can relax about tithing?

Even as I phrase it that way- you are probably ready to say, "Of course not!" We should tithe for the sheer joy of obedience. And you would be absolutely correct.

But there is another dimension that needs to be added to this equation- a dimension that the Malachi text expands on.

It begins with Paul's explanation-

He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles through Christ Jesus . . . Galatians 3:14

Jesus came to earth, not just to free us from the curse of the Law- but to bring us into the blessings of God's people.

There are very few aspects of Good News with as overwhelming a win-win description as this. We are freed from the curse but invited into the blessings

And what are the blessings of tithing? Malachi tells us-

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 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." Malachi 3:10

What is described here?

#4. Tithing Leads To Blessing

Going to our metaphor of God as the owner of the heavens and the earth, and we as His stewards- it tells us that God wants His stewards to be blessed in their assignments.

We are the workers in His Kingdom and as His workers God promises to equip us so that the assignments and stewardships He gives us will be a joy.

The NT particularly talks a great deal about the gifts that God has given His people- to fulfill their assignments. [ie put on the full armor of God, the lists of spiritual gifts, etc].

Would then, God want His workers frustrated? The idea is preposterous.

What Malachi is saying, however is that God will very specifically bless His people in response to the obedience that tithing represents.

Does this mean that those who tithe are given a guarantee of wealth?

This too has been a very convenient message for 1000s of unscrupulous preachers. "Just send your money into my ministry and God will bring you prosperity."

That message is of course directly contradicted in the Bible. Some of God's most faithful and diligent workers end up struggling financially and in other ways as well.

But the promise of Malachi is still very interesting and it seems to me that it leads to a conclusion that I would phrase this way, "If you tithe you will be blessed in astonishing ways."

And this promise is delivered with a most unusual challenge, "Test Me in this."
That is a very unusual challenge because it seems to contradict something we can all understand,

Do not test the LORD your God . . . Deuteronomy 6:16

Jesus repeated this to Satan when He was being tempted.

And yet here in Malachi, we are challenged to test God in the matter of the tithe.

Personally I think that this is a test that God wants His people to take up. God intends to bless His people and for some reason the tithe opens up that blessing in a very direct way.