

**Series: Joy in the Journey**

**Today: Malachi—The Messenger of the Tithe**

**Text: Malachi 3:6-12**

**A Sermon preached by the Rev. Randolph T. Riggs, D.Min.**

**Sunday, November 1, 2009**

**First Presbyterian Church of Lancaster, PA**

As we continue our series on Joy in the Journey, we turn this morning to Malachi. His is the final prophecy in the Hebrew Scriptures, so we are taking his journey a bit out of context, and we do so for a purpose. In two weeks we will be asking you to consider your financial support of our church. I think our Generosity Team has done a great job of giving us a perspective on giving which goes beyond our budget. However, last week I was awakened in the wee hours of the morning on several occasions concerned that when we ask you to make that commitment it ought to be in the context of something you can use as a guide for your own understanding of what it means to live your life in a generous response to all that God has given you.

Malachi was the final prophet to speak who pointed to the Messiah who was to come. He was also the messenger of the tithe which is a biblical standard by which we measure our generosity.

Malachi's name in Hebrew means "messenger." We know little about him other than the fact that he wrote sometime after 450 B.C. His message was both one of judgment and hope. He also gave definition to what it means to live our lives in generous response to God. He spoke a powerful word to the Israelites about God's anger because they had forgotten a generous response to the God who had been so generous to them. He used strong language. He called them robbers.

Eugene Peterson, in his introduction to Malachi, observes, "*But during humdrum times, when things are, as we tend to say, "normal," our interest in God is crowded to the margins of*

*our lives, and we become preoccupied with ourselves. “Religion” during such times is often trivialized into asking “God questions”—calling God into question or complaining about him, treating the worship of God as a mere hobby or diversion, managing our personal affairs for our own convenience and disregarding what God has to say about them, going about our usual activities as if God were not involved in such dailiness.” (The Message, p. 1733)*

I am not sure that anyone would say that these are normal times, unless you believe that crisis has become the new normal in our lives. However, managing our personal affairs for our own convenience, as if God did not care about the important decisions about the use of our time and our money; this is a message worth repeating no matter what our circumstances. To believe that God does not care about the way we respond to all that God has given to us is simply false. The prophet Malachi spoke boldly to the people of Israel about how they had forgotten to honor God by the giving of their tithes and their offerings.

Before I go any further, allow me state the obvious: this is not an easy message to preach. At this particular time and place in the economic history of our country many of you have seen your retirement savings reduced by 40%, and though your investments are probably beginning to rebound, most of us have not returned to what we had invested 15 months ago. There are many in our congregation who have lost their jobs and have not found new employment. There are many others who have had wage freezes or who have had to take a cut in their annual income in order to keep their jobs. Employers who used to provide benefits are passing on the cost of those benefits to their employees.

So talking about generosity in a time of economic uncertainty, and specifically talking about tithing, is not an easy message. However, I think it is an important one because it is biblical, it is practical, and I believe it can be transformational.

## BIBLICAL

I got a “Pickles” cartoon strip in my email this week which demonstrates how we tend to manage our own affairs for our personal convenience when it comes to generosity. The first frame of the cartoon shows a grandmother asking her grandson what he is going to be for Halloween. He responds that he is going to be God. The grandmother asks him why on earth he would want to be God, and his response was telling. He said, *“Because I like him, and I think maybe it will make people want to give me a tenth of all their candy.”*

Malachi was not the first person in the Bible to consider the tithe. At our Early Word Bible Study this week, Jack Houdeshel took us through a brief overview of the history of the tithe in the Bible.

- Genesis 14:17-20- Abram gives a tithe to Melchizedek who is the King of Righteous and Peace.
- Genesis 28: 18-20 –Jacob, Abraham’s son, promises a tithe at Bethel out of gratitude to God for all that God has given him.
- Leviticus 27:30-34—Moses speaks of the tithe to the people of Israel.
- II Chronicles 31:11—King Hezekiah keeps the Law of Moses by being sure that a tithe of all the grain is given to the Temple.
- Nehemiah 10:32-39—Nehemiah, the temple builder, made sure there was space in the Temple for the tithes of the people.
- Amos 4:4-7—The prophet Amos speaks of the punishment of God for those who forget the tithe.
- Matthew 23:23-24—Jesus compares the tithe to the weightier matters of the Law; justice, mercy and faith.
- Hebrews 7— reminds us of Abram’s tithe to the King of righteousness and peace; no longer Melchizedek, but Jesus.

The tithe is not simply a fundraising scheme thought up by the church in order to have a successful stewardship campaign. It is a part of fabric of our faith to be sure the people of God have a standard by which to judge their progress in responding to everything which God has given them.

## PRACTICAL

In this sense the tithe is still a practical guide for those of us who seek to follow Jesus with generosity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It gives us a benchmark. It provides us with a standard by which we can judge where we are in relation to our desire to live our lives as a generous response to a generous God.

It is so easy for us to fall into the cultural malaise of our time and cry “*ain't it awful.*” If you were here two weeks ago, you heard from our Kenyan brothers and sisters that they would gladly trade our standard of living for theirs in an instant.

For too many of us I fear that the current economic conditions in our country leave us focused on what we have lost rather than focusing on what we have. The tithe gives us the standard to define ourselves by what we have, and then to give thanks to God for all that we have been given. The tithe is simply giving a percentage of what God has given to you back to God. It is like a flat tax. To whom much has been given, much will be required. To those who have little, the requirement is still to give something, and the tithe is the biblical standard.

I was not raised in a home which taught me this concept. In fact, if you are like my father, it will be difficult for you to understand what Malachi taught about generosity. Dad believed that everything he made in life and all that he owned belonged to him. His motto was “*take care of yourself and expect others to do the same.*” He simply did not believe that what he was and what he had was a gift from God and the sum product of those who had invested in his life. He saw himself as a self-made man.

Malachi would have told my father that he was created in the image of God and after the likeness of God, and that whatever he had was given to him by the grace of God. Dad never found a way to acknowledge that. It was his Achilles heel in life.

So if no one has ever taught you to think about tithing, let me tell you how I learned to do it, and maybe it will be a place for you to begin. I learned it from the church. I learned it from people like you; the people of God who choose to follow Christ and give generously.

First, think about tithing as giving back a percentage of what God has given to you. If 10% is the biblical model, where you are on the tithing scale? It is pretty simple to find out. Look at your 2008 income tax form. What was your income last year? What did you give last year to all charitable causes? Divide your giving by your income, and you will have what percentage you gave to things you believe in. What percentage of your income was that? The national average is about 2%. Maybe you did better. Maybe you didn't. Wherever you are, start there with a percentage of your income as a basis for generosity instead of dollar amount.

Second, make a commitment to increase your giving by 1% of your income in 2010. Perhaps some of you will want to try more, but be realistic. Can you give 1% more of your income than you gave last year? Are you willing to give it a try?

Third, if it works to increase your giving by 1% of your income in 2010, try it again in 2011, and if it works for you in 2011, try it again in 2012. If you commit yourself to work toward tithing, even if you are only currently giving 1% or less of your income, you will reach a tithe in minimum of 10 years.

Some people often ask me if their percentage of giving should be given to the church, or can they include the other charitable contributions they make. My common response is this: "*I am not the tithing police.*" Of course the church needs your giving, but I believe God is more interested in your attitude toward giving than where you give it. Give in response to what God has given you, and if the church is an important part of that giving, we will be blessed. Some people ask me if the tithe is to go to the church, or can it go to other causes. Again I say, "*I am*

*not the tithing police.*” If you are giving from your heart, God will lead you to the way you should divide your giving.

### TRANSFORMATIONAL

Finally, a commitment to tithing can be transformational. It can fundamentally change the way we look at our lives. If you are one of those who has been viewing life from the perspective of what you don't have, tithing helps you to focus on what you do have and who gave you the strength, wisdom and insight to achieve it. If you are having trouble setting a budget or deciding your priorities in life, tithing helps you decide what is important by saying the first percentage of what you have belongs to God because God gave it all to you in the first place.

Some people tell me that they can't afford to give anything. I need to tell you I don't believe it. I think that is why Jesus told the story of the “widow's mite.” She gave what she could. The amount she gave was not important to him. The sacrifice she made was.

Tithing helps me to think about what is really important. I think that is why Jesus says, *“Where your money is, there will your heart be also.”* (Luke 12:34). Then I think about all the crazy things I do with my money. If some of us would just tithe the amount we spend on the things that aren't good for us—like coffee at a convenience store, or cigarettes, or candy—if we would just tithe what we spend on things like that, we might find our giving going up substantially.

Today is All Saints Sunday, and every year when we come to this day, I think about all the people who have made a difference in my life who have died.

Today I am thinking about Roger and Grace Cross who were both 84 years old when I came to be the assistant pastor of the United Church of Fayetteville, NY 38 years ago. Early in our ministry there, they invited Cherie and I to dinner and a chance to get to know them and their

faith. Roger and Grace planted a seed in our lives that took several more years to blossom. They helped us to see that tithing wasn't a law for them. It was an expression of gratitude by two people who had been so deeply grasped by the grace of God that they wanted to give back in thanks for all that God has given to them.

I am thinking about Virginia Hagood, who was a single woman living on a teacher's pension. She believed that generosity began when she reached a tithe. However, she encouraged those who were frightened to try it to give what they could and give it regularly until God got a hold of them and gave them the courage to risk doing something that was out of their comfort zone.

I am thinking about Bing Still who was the President of a major bank in Philadelphia who was one of the most generous men I have ever met but who felt he had never done enough to give God the glory in his life until he gave sacrificially.

And I am thinking about men and women in this church, both the living and the dead, who have taught me over and over again that generosity is the goal, tithing is the vehicle to reach the goal, and the joy of being a blessing to others is the reward.

### **CONCLUSION**

Of course this church needs your help in 2010. I would be less than honest with you if I did not tell you that. However, what is more important to me and to your leadership is that you respond to God in such a way that God knows how grateful you are.