

Giving to God what is His, for the sake of Canterbury

Malachi 3:6-12

2 Corinthians 9:6-15

"Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your life. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you." Luke 6:38

When Lorna & I became Christians we got our lives right with God and since then we have sought to go on with God. In that journey we have prospered, but not in a material sense like some say you should, our prosperity has been in our marriage and family; and the sole and relentless challenge to that prosperity has been materialism. This message is more a testimony of our journey in the matter of giving to the place of revelation in terms of our giving.

Our Giving is a deeply serious matter and one that is at the heart of Christian discipleship, for surely the principle hindrance to the advancement of God's Kingdom is greed. It is the chief obstacle to heaven-sent revival in our nation. It seems that where the back of greed is broken, the human spirit soars in the regions of unselfishness that shapes every area of our lives and living. I believe it is safe to say that there can be no continuous revival without 'hilarious' giving, for wherever there is hilarious giving there will be continuous revival (hilarious comes from the Greek halarion 2 Corinthians 9:7 and is usually translated conservatively as 'cheerful giver'). Yes this message will focus on the Bible's teaching on tithing but the point of transformation for you and me, and our households is not the point of giving or tithing but the embracing of a godly attitude of generosity which is shot through every part of our lives thus reflecting the heart of Jesus. The Giving of ourselves and our resources unreservedly to our own households and the Household of God, the giving of people's time and effort for the Kingdom: second mile stuff. 100% of our lives and love: all we are and have put at His feet.

Simply put, God wants the first fruits of our lives and resources (Proverbs 3:9 'Honour the Lord with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops.'). As I have come to understand it, He wants His tithe (note: it's not my tithe, it's His at all times). A little known Hebrew word *herem* encapsulates this for us - it means 'the things devoted to God' and it carries with it a curious double edge. If the *herem* is used for God's work, it is totally holy and releases blessing: if it is not used for God's work, then it has the opposite effect: carrying with it the opposite of blessing upon the person/people retaining it. Surely this can't be true you say but that's what the Bible teaches! The tithe is the *herem* and so Malachi 3:8 tells us that if we retain it we are 'robbing God' and 'under a curse' (v9). Strong Stuff!

So this is a matter, which affects our whole lives - maybe you struggling at present? Well, maybe just maybe it might stem from your attitude to giving and, as a consequence, you are experiencing, not the 'floodgates of heaven open' (v10) but maybe the opposite of blessing on your family or household. Why? Because you are retaining that which is 'devoted to God'. Whilst not specifically about tithing its interesting to look at the story of Jesus' encounter with Zacchaeus in Luke 19: although his salvation was not dependant on his giving it was worked out by breaking his greed and replacing it with generosity. In Philippians 2 v 12, we are told to 'work out our salvation with fear and trembling'. We don't mind working out our own salvation but surely we don't need the fear and trembling bit?

Giving is the overflow of our relationship with God. You see rules without relationship lead to rebellion. Our wallets and chequebooks are always the last thing to be converted. This is a serious business - concerning the salvation of the world - and goes way beyond the tithe/gift itself to the heart attitude/overriding passion for Jesus and the lost, and an absolute trust in His sovereign power. We are saying, "Lord

Jesus, I am yours - all I have and all I am is yours - 100%". This is not a covenant of equals: I'll do this if you do that. It is a relationship of Father and child, wrapped in each other's arms, yet knowing their given role. God is calling forth a radical new generation of believers who will not compromise on the cost of discipleship and who will pay the price to win this nation once again. So God calls upon you and me to tithe, and then to give offerings (missionaries, disaster appeals etc.) and to personify a spirit of generosity. This is no 10% club that permits you to feel more holy; it is just the foundation of a life of generous service to the Master.

So let's do a brief tour of the OT tithing passages:

Genesis 4:3f the principle is here established. Cain brings the 'leftovers' of his harvest to God as an offering, whilst Abel brings 'fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock'. God rejects Cain's harvest but accepts Abel's. His is the first fruits.

Genesis 14:20 Abraham tithes to the priest Melchizedek (10%).

Genesis 28:22 Jacob's vow to God at Bethel includes tithing (10%).

Leviticus 27: 28-30 People/things devoted (*herem*) to the Lord (most holy to the Lord). Note: the Hebrew term refers to the irrevocable giving over of things or persons to the Lord, often by totally destroying them (e.g. cursed).

Malachi 3:9 says that you are under a curse (the whole nation of you), not your finances.

Numbers 18:8-32. The concept that God gets 'the best of the first' is a constant in the worship texts of the Bible.

People/things are regarded as 'holy' because they are transferred to the Lord for His use (v10). The oil and the wine (v12) are not the dregs but the finest of the first fruits. In giving the first and the best to the Lord, believers are affirming with confidence that there will be something left for their own needs. And if not, true believers will still bless the Lord. They do not worship God just because it is a way to a full

stomach. But in their worship of God, they then and now expect that the giving of the first and best to God will often result in more than ever for themselves and for their family. Here is where many of us are not being totally honest with the Lord in our giving. Often we find ourselves giving out of our surplus. When there is no surplus, we are not going to give to the Lord. Others find that when they give to God of the first of their best, then they wind up with a surplus they had not even anticipated - that's God's upside down Kingdom and it's our testimony!

Whenever something was devoted (*herem*) it belonged to the priests (unless destroyed) (8:14-16). The firstborn of every womb was to be consecrated to the Lord (Ex 13:2); here we learn that the firstborn were a means of supporting the priests. A good example of this would be Hannah giving Samuel to Eli (1 Sam 1 f). The priest would receive the firstborn of animals and man or their redemption price (v15) e.g. firstborn redemption was five shekels. This is a perpetual reminder that conception, birth and life are gifts of God (Ex 22:29-30) and, as we think of the extent of these rituals in the biblical period, we realise that they extend to Jesus - the firstborn of Mary; He had to be redeemed, then He became the Redeemer of all! Joshua 6/7: Conquest & Destruction of Jericho. This is probably the best example of *herem* - in this case a whole city and its people 'devoted' to the Lord. The context is the conquest of Canaan and Jericho was the first city which was to be 'devoted' (*herem*) to the Lord and destroyed, except for Rahab (6:17f). God had said that they could not have anything out of Jericho (nothing for 40 years! They would be cursed if they rebuilt v26). Why? Because Jericho was cursed as the first fruits in the Promised Land. It belonged to the Lord - a tithe! All perishable people/things were burnt (v17, 21, 24) and the imperishable belonged absolutely to the Lord (6:24) and were taken to His treasury. Joshua warned the people about this, but Achan took a coat/200 shekels/gold and silver. He

kept what should have been destroyed; he stole what was for the temple. He took it and hid it. Israel then attacked Ai. God seemed to be saying 'It's yours!' but they were defeated - 36 losing their lives. Why? Because they had *harem* in the camp (7:11/13). Achan confessed and he and all his family were stoned to death and all their possessions were burnt. The echo of this story in the New Testament is that of Ananias and Sapphira, which we looked at in the Acts series. (Acts 5:1f) And so to Malachi who tells us that we should bring the whole tithe into the storehouse (the house of the Lord) to sanctify it. You see, you can't tell God what to do with His tithe. You can't label it:

The whole 10% tithe needs to be brought to the Lord. Why? Because it is not yours or mine to label! Then God encourages us to bring offerings (freewill) and alms (for the poor). God has established the tithe to share the load evenly (it's not a competition in righteousness or a comparison with others, or to consummate with your influence!), so your tithe will directly relate to your income: the widow's mite being as important as a much larger amount, indeed she gave all she had! (Some ask whether the tithe is before or after tax: personally, I answer that we have always been convicted to tithe on our gross income but in essence, the question betrays a wrong attitude from the start!) There is no way that the tithe should become a latter day 'indulgence', so the tithe is a clear sign that you are an active, committed disciple of Jesus, and it is not a 'ticket to heaven'. The 'storehouse' is clearly the local church of which you are a part and through which you mature in your discipleship and minister. You need regularly to be praying over your tithe so that it will be sanctified and used for holy purposes and because it is *herem* (cursed), you should be keen to 'get that cursed thing out of my house!'

So what did Jesus say about tithing?

Matthew 23:23 Jesus here warns against paying one's tithe and ignoring the clear signs of the Kingdom: justice, mercy and

faithfulness. It is a clear word for us all, but it does not in any way negate the tithe. In fact, Jesus gives an example of a tithe of the smallest of increases (spice!). And out of 30 parables, Jesus deals with money or land in 20! Perhaps the most memorable of His sayings is: You can't serve God and money (Matthew 6:24): now that's clear!

And what about Paul? (2 Corinthians 8 & 9)

First in 1 Corinthians 16 Paul says that our giving should be regular (on the first day of the week), the result of individual response ('each one of you' - the giver as important as the gift) and proportionate (in keeping with income). In v2 he says that giving should not be based on emotional appeal or financial pressure; it is a spiritual ministry based on spiritual principles. Then in 2 Corinthians 9 Paul stresses the need for generosity and my experience tells me that this is the lovely first fruit of renewal in a believer's life: 'whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously' (2 Corinthians 9 v6). Our attitude should be that of 'hilarious givers' (v7) and our model for giving is Christ himself (v15).

People challenge this teaching on tithing with their own opinions or by saying it's old covenant but the Bible is very black and white on this matter with no shades of grey: the Lord knows what a stronghold materialism is: we can't serve two masters. Sharing our homes, our possessions and goods, our lives, out of a heart of gratitude to the Lord 'who had no place to lay his head'.

So this is our testimony, and we hope it's yours or will soon become so. For this is the only time in scripture that the Lord openly says 'Test me in this and see if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it' (Malachi 3:10).

Pastor David

November 25th 2012