

In the text of Scripture before us today, the Living God announces incredibly good news for people under financial stress. For in this text, the Living One, in whom we live and move and have our being, makes two tremendous promises in the face of financial stress.

And in this text we are told that the good news becomes a working reality when, in the face of financial stress, we trust the Promiser by doing what He tells us to do.

I want to assure you that in preaching this text today I am not asking you for more money. Not that I am ashamed to; not that I am afraid to. Goodness sakes ... what greater cause is there to ask you to give more than the work of making disciples of Jesus Christ? I am not ashamed or afraid to ask you to give lots more for Him and His ministry in the world! The more we give the more more ministry can happen. But I want to assure you that in preaching from the prophet Malachi today I am not asking you for more funds. I am asking you for more faith. I am asking you for more of what the apostle Paul calls "the obedience of faith" (Romans 1:5; 16:26). I am asking you to trust the great Promiser by doing what He commands us to do. If such "obedience of faith" is exercised by us there will be more than enough money to do all that Jesus Christ calls us to do at this significant moment in history.

I wonder how the first readers of Malachi's prophecy reacted when they were told that their problems were due to robbing God. Robbing God?

"Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord. A great word!

"Return to Me, and I will return to you."

"How shall we return?" ask the people.

"Will a man rob God?" asks God. "Yet you are robbing Me!" "How?" ask the people. "How are we robbing You?"

"In tithes and offerings," says the Lord.

Let me briefly fill you in on the historical background

in which this prophetic dialogue first takes place.

It was during the fifth century before the birth of Jesus Christ. The Jews had just recently returned from Babylon where they had been held in captivity for 70 years. They had resettled in Jerusalem with high hopes (so James T.H. Adamson, *New Bible Commentator*, Malachi, p. 804). The Temple had been rebuilt. And although it did not have the splendor and glory of the Temple built by Solomon, it did serve the purpose of re-instituting the worship life of Israel.

But by the time of this dialogue in Malachi, the people were becoming increasingly disillusioned. Their hopes for prosperity and peace were not materializing. Life was very hard. On every side they faced hostile nations; there was constant threat of invasion. And they were in the midst of a severe drought, causing bad crops and famine (see 3:11). The economy was very shaky. Inflation was running high.

We can, therefore, fully appreciate the fact that in such circumstances the people began to doubt the love of God (see 1:2). And, as happens to many of us, the circumstances raised questions about the justice of God (2:17). Evil doers were the ones getting ahead in life; it was the ungodly and disobedient who were enjoying prosperity. Many believers were feeling that it simply did no good to do good (3:14).

Into those circumstances God sends the prophet Malachi with a word from God. The message was simple and direct. But it was not what the people wanted to hear.

Malachi says that the adversity they were facing was not due to the lack of God's love or justice. The adversity was not due to any unfaithfulness on God's part. The adversity was due to unfaithfulness on the people's part. What? Through Malachi God says that the people had no right to call into question the ways of God, claiming that it does no good to do good. For contrary to all their proper religious rituals, they were not doing good, they were not exercising faith.

So Malachi, like the prophets before him, exposes their unfaith. I encourage you to read the whole book sometime, it speaks a very relevant word to many issues in the church today. The whole thrust of the book is, how can the nation expect to prosper when it was so utterly faithless?

For example, Malachi points to the corrupt worship of the priests (1:6). The priests were presenting unworthy sacrifices at the altar. The sacrifices were supposed to be unblemished, from the best of the flock. But the priests were offering sacrifices, which says Malachi, would insult human leaders if offered to them.

Furthermore, the priests were bored with their duties, going through the motions just for pay (1:13).

Malachi also pointed out the practice of men divorcing their wives simply in order to marry younger, sexier women from foreign nations (2:14).

Then in the verses preceding the dialogue about robbing God, Malachi lists various signs of the people's unfaithfulness: they were consulting sorcerers, committing adultery, swearing falsely, cheating workers of their just wages, ignoring or oppressing widows and orphans, and not caring for the needs of immigrants (3:5).

Malachi's point? Old Testament scholar James Adamson puts it succinctly:

"How could they (the people of Israel) expect to prosper when the country was rotten with such practices?"

But thankfully Malachi does not leave it there. He comes with a word of grace. He comes with a word from the God of grace. "Return to Me, and I will return to you" (3:7). God wants the people of His covenant to enjoy His prosperity and peace. God does not delight in their adversity. God wants the best for them. God calls out, "Return to Me, and I will return to you".

The people ask the obvious question. "How shall we

return to You?" (3:7). How shall we turn around? How shall we express our desire to be Your people? How shall we demonstrate to You that we take You seriously?

God answers their question with a question and an indictment.

"Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me!"

What? We ... mere human beings ... robbing God? So they ask, "How are we robbing You?"

Then comes the concrete answer. "In tithes and offerings" (3:8). You are robbing Me by not bringing to Me the whole tithe.

The word "tithe" simply means "a tenth part". To tithe means to give to God and the work of His Kingdom a tenth, the first tenth of the seed and crops and flocks and paychecks. Why? Because the first tenth is God's. Actually it is all God's. If we do not realize it now we will when we die. It is all God's. But the first 10% is especially God's. "You are robbing Me by not bringing in the whole tithe, the whole 10%."

Giving the tithe was part of the faith of the people of God right from the beginning. Abraham, for instance, after defeating the King of Elam, gave a tenth of the goods to Melchizedek, the priest of the most high (Genesis 14:1-24; Hebrews 7:1-3). This was his way of worshipping, of giving thanks for victory.

And Jacob, after a dream about God's future blessing on him and his family, covenanted with God to give God the first 10% of all he would receive (Genesis 28:18-20).

Then when God gave Moses the Law, spelling out the covenant responsibilities, God commanded every family to give 10% of their seeds, crops, herds to God (Leviticus 27:30-33; Deuteronomy 14:22; Numbers 18:21). "It is holy to the LORD," says the text. That is, claimed by God, set apart by God for God. The first tenth is God's.

In Old Testament times, this tithe wasn't paid all at once ... but throughout the year. It was to be presented in

portions at three major feasts: Passover, Pentecost (Weeks), and Tabernacles (Booths). At the Feasts, the worshippers would present their basket of first fruits to the priests ... who would in turn, lay them on the altar. Then the worshippers would pray the prayer recorded in Deuteronomy 26:

"My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down to Egypt and sojourned there, few in number; but there he became a great, mighty and populous nation. And the Egyptians treated us harshly and afflicted us, and imposed hard labor on us. Then we cried to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our affliction and our toil and our oppression; and the Lord brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm and with great terror and with signs and wonders; and He has brought us to this place, and has given us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And now behold, I have brought the first of the produce of the ground which Thou, O Lord, hast given me." Deuteronomy 26:5-10.

You can see then that giving to God the first 10% was a way of remembering God's salvation, a way of acknowledging God's blessing, and a way to give thanks to God for being so faithful.

By the way, we would note that the actual percentage of one's yearly harvest and income given would exceed 10%. George Mallone, in his book, Furnace of Renewal, writes,

"In case you are keeping count of the total obligation inherent in the Old Testament legislation, you must also add travel expenses".

That's because worship in Israel was centralized, it took place in selected places. So each family had to pack up and travel to those places. If the distance was too far to carry the goods, it was permissible to sell the goods and buy appropriate sacrifices when you arrived in Jerusalem. The travel would, of course, involve expense for food and lodging. So tithing in Israel meant more than 10%. It would run anywhere from 15%

to 30%.

"It is much more accurate to say that Israel gave one-fifth to one-third rather than one-tenth of its resources to God" (p. 133-134).

What was the purpose of the tithe? Three-fold. It made corporate worship possible. It provided for the needs of the priests ... they were given the crops and animals after the service. And it enabled the community to care for the poor and hungry, the fatherless and widow.

What is important to observe about all this is that the tithe was actually handed to the Levitical priests. So someone might argue that by not paying the whole tithe the people were only robbing the Temple and its priests. No, says God, "You are robbing Me." (3:8,9).

Notice how Malachi puts it. "You are robbing Me, the whole nation of you" (3:9). "Nation" is a word normally used of the unbelieving, heathen gentiles. The point God is making was devastating: In withholding the whole tithe, His people were acting as unbelievers and not as His covenant people.

"Return to Me."

"How?"

"Stop robbing Me ... bring in the whole tithe."

Times were hard. We can understand the temptation to hold back on giving the whole tithe. They were likely afraid that they would not be able to meet their other needs and obligations if they gave the whole tithe. I understand that. These past two years have been hard for our family. Good ... but hard. The move from Sacramento to Glendale has involved great financial stress. Car insurance is twice as much as up north. Property tax is twice as much. Food and entertainment are higher. The four children are now moving into their greatest expense years. Believe me ... I know the temptation to withhold the tithe. A number of times I am severely tempted, especially in September with school starting and December with Christmas. I can understand the

people of Malachi's day holding back.

Yet even in those hard times of drought and famine, of inflation and military threat, God challenges His people: "Return to Me, and I will return to you." How? "The first 10% is not yours ... stop robbing Me ... bring in the whole tithe."

Why? Why this connection between returning to God and the tithe? Clearly it is not saying that we "buy our way" into relationship with God. What a perversion of the Gospel that would be! Then what is the connection? Why does God even bring up the matter of money when speaking of our relationship with Him? Because more than anything else, what we do with money reveals our priorities, our values, our allegiances, our sense of security. What we do with money reveals what we really believe. Someone once said, "If you want to know what people really believe about what they sing and say in worship, look at their checkbook stubs."

"Return to Me," says the Lord.

"How?"

"Stop robbing Me."

"Robbing You? How are we robbing You?"

"The first 10% is Mine, not yours. Who has first place in your heart? Stop robbing Me, and bring in the whole tithe."

Then God declares the good news, the good news that changes the whole picture!

God speaks to the fear that if when we are already financially tight, we give Him His 10% we will not be able to make it on the 90%. God says to us, "Test Me in this." It is the only time God allows it, testing God. "Trust Me in this." And then God makes two tremendous promises. Two, not just one, as I grew up thinking. But two. It is the combination of the two promises that constitutes God's good news for financial stress.

The first promise. "Test Me in this, and see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows" (3:10). Other versions render it, "I will throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much

blessing that you will not have room enough for it." Test Me, do what I tell you to do, bring in the whole tithe, and see what I will do!!

You see how God is speaking to our fear? The fear that we will not be able to make it on the 90%? God's promise is: You will not be living on 90%! Bring in the whole tithe and you will have more than 90%: "You will be living on the extra blessings I will pour on you." You will have at your disposal more than what you are trying to keep!!

I have intentionally walked with Jesus Christ for only 27 years now. And in my 27 years I have never met, nor heard of, a believer who has proved God to be a liar. I have never met, nor heard of, a believer who faithfully tithes going without the necessities of life. I could tell story after story of how God provided, in surprising ways! Nor have I met or heard of a believer who tithes lacking the greater blessings of God's joy, peace, hope, direction, purpose in life.

Test Me in this, bring in the whole tithe and see if I do not take care of your needs in abundant ways.

And there is a second promise. This is the one that frees me to give obedience a try.

"Test Me in this ... bring in the whole tithe ... Then I will rebuke the devourer for you ... so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground."

See how this addresses our fear? The fact is, when we withhold the whole tithe we do not then have at our disposal 95% or 98%. In the mystery of things we end up with much less than 90%. Why? Because of the devourer. There is a devourer who eats away the 95% or 98%. Mammon eats it up. Mammon is a real power, a real force. And when we serve and worship it, it devours what we have. It creates appetites for things we simply do not need. It causes us to litter away our resources on nonessentials.

The promise is that if we bring in the whole tithe, the 90% is not eaten up by the enemy! God does a deep work in us, freeing us from greed and lust, from gluttony and

materialism. God goes deep and changes our sense of identity from "consumer" to "steward".

A two-fold promise. I will throw open the floodgates ... and rebuke the devourer. And the 90% ends up doing more than the 100% we want to keep! "Bring the whole tithe" ... and watch Me transform your finances, says the Lord.

Now, at this point someone could raise an objection. Someone could point out that nowhere in the New Testament do we find the command to tithe, to give the first 10%. And that's right. The question is then, "why?". Why does the New Testament not call for it? For two reasons. First, the New Testament authors assume it. (see Luke 11:42). And, second, in light of God's amazing love in Jesus Christ the call is no longer "some" (10% or 30%), but "all" (100%).

"Present your bodies a living sacrifice," says Paul. How can we present our bodies without presenting our pocketbooks? The call is give all that you are and have. All Jesus Christ asks of us now is all ... that's all! The New Testament goal is to employ everything we have for Jesus Christ and His Kingdom. Bringing in the whole tithe is a way to get started. In the New Testament the tithe is not the goal, it is the starting place. The goal is all.

"Will a man rob God?"

Unthinkable!

"Yet you are robbing Me," says the Lord.

"How?"

"In tithes and offerings. Bring in the whole tithe and watch what I will do!"

\$1.5 million is what is needed to "do it right" at GPC in the coming year. \$1.5 million. The elders have felt they need to back it off to \$1.3 million. Why back off? Is \$1.5 million too high? Get this. Let's say we had only 500 giving units. And let's say that the average gross income of each giving unit was \$30,000. 500 giving units with an average giving income, \$30,000. The whole tithe equals \$1.5 million. The fact is, we

have more than 500 giving units. And the average income is much higher than \$30,000 per unit.

Interesting statistics. In 1933, at the depth of the Great Depression, the average giving of church members was 3.3%. Today the average is 1.9%. Interesting. The average giving of those who make more than \$100,000 is 2.9%. The average giving of those who make less than \$10,000 is 5.5%. Interesting. According to Russell Chandler, former religion editor of the LA Times, if every disciple of Jesus Christ in America were to give the whole tithe, the amount of financial resources available for ministry, beyond the present level, would be \$82 billion. \$82 billion. Can you imagine the ministry that can happen with \$82 billion? That's enough to eliminate the worst of world poverty (65). And enough to address critical domestic needs (1.7). And still carry on thriving ministries in our churches.

The American church is robbing God of \$82 billion.

"Trust Me," says the Lord. "Bring in the whole tithe," says the Lord. Stop robbing Me, and watch Me open the window of heaven and pour out the riches of My blessing upon you. Stop robbing, and watch Me stop the devourer from robbing you.