

Just curious: tell the truth. Did anyone read the sermon title, “The Gifts of Tithing,” and think, “Oh, Puh-leeze...I think I’m going to be sick...One of the things I really like about this church is that they’re not always after you for money, and now they’re even going to ruin that for me.” (If so, not to worry. There was a time in my life when I felt just like that, when I could feel your pain. Thank God, however, not for a long time!)

It’s mostly just family here this morning, and this is one of those times when I’m only talking to you who are freely choosing to be members of this congregation, or at least only those of you who have freely chosen to offer your life to our Lord. Nothing personal, but if any of you has not done that you cannot help but misconstrue most of what I’m about to say. (If you are not a member, we are thrilled you’re here, as always, to worship with us, but this might be a good morning not to pay very close attention. I’ll probably do you more harm than good, perhaps confirm your fears that churches are only after money, always trying to make you feel so guilty you finally reluctantly give a little more just to shut ‘em up, or else go to some other church where they have manners enough not to talk about money. But do come back one of the other 51 weeks of the year!)

In my church growing up, I never heard anything about “tithing”: about giving 10% of your income, 10% your time, 10% of your conversation, 10% of your “time, talents, and treasure,” anything like that. The principle seemed to be give as little as you could get away with and not feel totally guilty; after all, there were plenty of other families in the parish, it wasn’t all that important, and besides a lot of families were more rich and more holy than we were.

(Also, if there’s time left over, I’ll tell you about that afternoon in the fall of 1984, thru no credit to myself, when I had a huge assist from the Holy Spirit which helped to shape my attitude toward tithing ever since.)

Oh, before I forget: about the sermon title. You may already know your tithing results in gifts to you, gifts to your congregation, gifts to Christ’s Church, and your tithing strengthens the Kingdom of God—but according to the prophet Malachi, anyway, our practice of tithing 10% of our income is not necessarily a gift to God.

And speaking of Malachi, maybe you can sometimes relate to the illness afflicting his congregation, the covenant people of God. He wrote back in the 5th Century B.C.; his people had been thru a lot. Believe it or not, they were unable to feel the love of God [1:2]. They were unable to experience any blessing from their gifts and offerings, as if it made no difference in their lives what they gave to or withheld from God [2:13]. They were talking and praying to God all the time, but they had lost, can you imagine, a sense of the presence of God with them: “How did we make God tired of hearing our voice...Where is God, anyway?” [2:17-18] They even felt God had turned His back on them; God was unavailable [3:7]. We heard Malachi’s very simple prescription for all these spiritual ailments: “You are pushing God away because you are robbing God, and you don’t even know it. You are robbing God in broad daylight—not even burglary, which is done in secret—you have been robbing God every time you have not freely given your tithes and your offerings. Your tithe of ten percent is not a gift from you to

God, it's the beginning point. It's not raising the stakes, it's your ante for simply sitting at the table of life, for being part of the family of God, for being dealt in this hand on planet earth. Your offerings "above and beyond" your tithe may count as gifts, but let's not confuse categories. If you fail to tithe, no wonder you don't sense the nearness of God, no wonder you don't experience God's favor in your life; if you won't tithe, then don't be surprised that God feels far away from you."

Don't give up on me yet; it's still my job, and I aim to get there, to encourage you in your conviction that tithing is a gift and a blessing from God rather than a baleful obligation of the Law. [Sorry, if anyone was looking for a good loophole—that today we operate on the principles of gospel rather than Law; gospel freedom, rather than the legalistic practice of having to follow the letter of the Law. The principle of giving 10% was the old covenant, right? Not quite: we just heard Jesus respond as if only tithing and nothing more were actually hypocrisy: "Woe to you Pharisees who legalistically tithe your 10% but don't have a heart of compassion, obedience, faithfulness, participating in joyful abundance. *Do not neglect the tithe: 10% is your starting point*—but also keep growing so that you can allow God's blessings to greatly change you from within.")

Of course Jesus knows all about our financial situation, our responsibilities, our income, our spending, our habits, our priorities, the negative attitude of your spouse toward the Church. Remember how He commended the old widow who gave her last quarter of a cent into the temple plate. "I tell you truly: this poor widow has put in more than anyone else." [Mk 12:43] God knows it's ultimately not about the number of zeros but it's about the attitude of our lives and the trust in our heart. God knows some of you who have not tithed have been extremely faithful and generous beyond measure. But God also knows, as we do, our checkbook doesn't lie. God knows when we're being truthful and when we're trying to bamboozle ourselves, just as we know how honest our children are being with us.

It's not about the money. But if you keep telling yourself it's not about the money, it probably is.

The easy part about tithing is to understand the principle: out of everything I receive, I freely and joyfully choose to offer 10%, the first and best 10% I have, back to Christ's Church. It's that simple; even the math is simple. (If the tithe were, say, 7.6% or 12.417%, the math would be complicated. But we can all move the decimal point one place and figure out 10%. God's trying to work with us on this...)

The hard part about tithing, at least for those who have never quite tried it, is not the math but the trust. If I were actually to give away 10%, would I have enough? Could I get the kids thru college? Will I have enough for my retirement? What about accidents, layoffs, "a rainy day?" Whether we tithe or not, we can see this logic is a bit of a slap in the face to God. Do I really think God does not know I have children? Does God not know that I can't work forever, that I might take ill or be incapacitated? (Has God not given us brains enough to pay up our insurance premiums, whether we tithe or not?) The point is whether or not we trust God to be God. Can we make it, being obedient to God? Will God cover us? Can God be counted on?

The most breathtaking letter of trust I have seen was one submitted by a family in this church some years ago this time of year, along with your covenant. This family had sustained a tremendous financial setback, and faced very uncertain financial prospects for the future. The covenant detailed a few of the costly ways in which the family had

already needed to cut back. It also enunciated, as I remember, something like this...“However, after much prayer we are hereby covenanting not to reduce our financial commitment to this church we love. Our financial status has been greatly diminished, but the importance of our church to us, nor our trust in God to provide for all our needs in the future has not been. So we are honored to continue to support this church no less than we have done...” [and it was no insignificant sum]

The principle of the tithe, giving our first 10%, applies not just to money. In our weekly recall we promise also to “tithe our time and our conversation.” Think of the gifts released to you and to this church if each one of us were willing to dedicate 10% of our hours, 10% of our total words spoken to God’s work. By my figures, this would come to 2.4 hours per day or 16.8 hours per week given to Christ’s Church. (Even if we wanted to shave it down to 10% of waking hours, it would still come to 11 hours and 12 minutes per week.) Imagine, instead of 2 or 3 very faithful women carrying the full load for Christian Ed, trying to organize and teach about 100 young people, what could be done and how encouraged they would be if each of us were serious about 11 hours to the church each week. (I realize that for some of you, only 11 hours per week would be a reduction!)

There are so many opportunities for service here, so many ways in which our church is being held back for lack of servants choosing to step forward. Imagine what our trip to La Mision in early December would be like, and what gifts so many of us would receive and also bring to Heidi and Daniel, from whom you heard last Sunday, and those children at the Open Arms daycare center. Imagine the attendance at our All-Church Retreat, and the attendant blessings and connections and encouragement and long-term enrichment to us as individuals and as a congregation were we each committed to offering our church 5.2 weekends every year. (How moved I was when one of you shared, during our final Communion Service at Pilgrim Pines recently, of both the blessing of the weekend but also her sense of her church as family. “I was too busy to come, it would have been a lot easier not to come, I almost didn’t come this year. But you are my church family. I can’t let down my church family.” She, and each of the rest of us, were so glad she did not. Just imagine, if we each spent 10% of our time in direct service to our Lord. (Of course we’re all busy: does God get the first 10% or the leftovers?)

How many of us consciously spend 10% of our words each day for the sake of our Lord or the gospel? Matt and I were home when a pair of Jehovah’s Witnesses, plus a 13-year old son of one of them in training, knocked on our front door one Saturday morning not long ago. We spent an hour or so with them. (I invited them to come back with their supervisor so we could all perhaps come to a common understanding of what the Bible says, and what Jesus asks of His followers, but for some reason I haven’t heard back from them.) I don’t envy them their theology—but I hope we all give credit where credit is due: they sure understand about freely and joyfully offering 10% of their time, their words, their dollars to their church.

Do you ever wonder why people with so little seem to find it easier to tithe than folks with so much? It is true, statistically, that the churches with the highest percentage of people who tithe are impoverished minority Pentecostal churches. We’re fortunate to be able to trust Hoag Hospital, to trust our insurance companies, to trust the broker who

handles our IRAs, to maybe sort of trust Social Security, to trust in our own abilities to earn a living and to get on in the world. But still it goes against the grain of our human nature to “let go” and trust in God, the Giver behind the gifts we so enjoy; the Source behind the blessings. Always has, always will.

I attended a memorable workshop conducted at an annual Conference meeting of the UCC. The theme was “stewardship,” the speaker was the Rev. Alvin Jackson, Senior Pastor of the largest Disciples of Christ church in the country—and the one with the highest proportion of persons who tithe. It happens to be a predominantly African-American church. He said he preached on tithing fairly often. (I also remember raising my hand in the ensuing Q & A session, surprised that he told his congregation that he tithes. I always figured what we give was between Trish, me, and God. But he looked me in the eye, “Why would folks in your congregation ever be willing do what they don’t know you yourself are willing to do?” Since then, I haven’t tried to keep my giving such a secret. Last year, Trish and I gave just over 14% of our gross and 19% of our takehome pay to this church. (I wish I could say that puts us somewhere in the middle of the pack.) In any case we cannot keep up with the gifts God keeps bringing us.)

Why do folks with so little apparently find it easier to tithe than folks with so much? I remember well the story Alvin Jackson told. Maybe you will too. There was a young man attending Worship who had no job, didn’t have any money. None, not one dime. The people were gladly putting in their tithes and offerings as the plate came along, and that poor guy had nothing to put in. Not even a penny. It was pitiful. The best he could do was wave his hands over that plate, promising God that when he got older if he ever got a job he would be so thankful to God he would gladly give 10%. Sure enough, next month he got a job and his first paycheck was \$20, and the following Sunday he was the happiest man in the house, gladly offering to God his \$2.

That young man had a cheerful heart and a great attitude. He soon got a raise; before long his paycheck was \$40, and he gave his \$4 with pleasure. He was a hardworking man, and he loved God, and he eagerly tithed all he made, and you wouldn’t be surprised to hear that a few years later he was making \$80,000/year; he was so thankful he eagerly gave \$8,000/year to that church, plus some additional gifts here and there.

Wouldn’t you know it, that young man became an entrepreneur. He had a spirit which readily trusted God, so God was eager to bless him. He was learning he couldn’t outgive God. One year he made \$300,000, and \$30,000 was the first check he wrote, in January, to that church which meant so much to him, and he made other gifts also. He kept enjoying the favor of God; his company grew, and one year—ready for this?—he made a billion dollars.

You know what he did? Sure enough that collection plate came around that Sunday morning and that guy said, “Are you crazy? You think I’m gonna give away \$100 million? Do you have any idea how much money that is? You think I can afford to give away that kind of money? Forget it! What would this little church do with that kind of money, anyway? All this church wants is my money.”

There are some, relative strangers to Christ, accustomed to asking, before we give, “What will the church do with my money, anyway?” How urgent is the need, compared to other causes I might support? Some might be thinking we do things backward: why do we make our financial commitments, celebrate Covenant Sunday in

November, before we know what our budget will be? (For that matter, why did I not preach this sermon two Sundays ago, when you were praying about your commitment to turn in this day? Even about tithing, we do not try to manipulate.)

You all, no strangers to Jesus, know we tithe because it's our privilege to tithe; it's a great way to open the channels of heaven to receive God's blessings and pass them along. To stop tying God's hands in blessing us and many others. Christians tithe; we give the first 10% of what we have to Christ's Church—according to Jesus, anyway. (I wouldn't have the guts to preach this to you, otherwise! But Jesus talked more about money and being responsible with it before God than any other single subject in the gospels.)

Tithing is a discipline of the Christian Way, the Christian Life. And it's one of the easiest. You decide once, around this time of year, how much you will give next year, and then you do it. It takes no more energy to write in this number over that number in a checkbook...maybe a little more trust in God. (I mean it's not like quitting drinking, where you have to steel yourself every time you go to a party. Something like that must be hard.) It takes a little more trust in God: do people really think God will abandon someone who is being so faithful, someone contributing so generously to the Kingdom, the Church? If you were God, would you?

The budgeting season comes afterward in our church. Wouldn't you love to serve on the Bd of Trustees, or the Bd of Christian Mission, if we were all tithing? What a gift to this church, and into the lives of so many others around us. We don't tithe because we need a new roof (\$40,000 or so) or a new kitchen which is at least minimally safe to operate, or because we need more space for our toddlers, or for our Youth Group, or because we will be supporting an Associate Pastor to help encourage and teach and challenge and grow us. We tithe because we love Jesus and because we trust in God.

If you are "earnestly moving toward tithing," but not quite there yet, for a lot of people the simplest way to do that is incrementally. If you're giving 2% this year, and you're not quite ready to receive the gifts and blessings that would come from giving 10% next year, then what if you decide on 4% next year, then 7%, then 10% in 2009?

As you maybe consider that, consider also that it's not every day God extends us a blank check. Did you hear what God is promising us, thru the prophet Malachi? "You have been robbing me by withholding your tithe. No wonder you feel I am far away from you. But still, bring your full tithe into the storehouse...and 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...the vine in your field shall not be barren," says the LORD of hosts." [vv7-11] "See if I will not keep My promise, and if I will not bless you. Test Me in this...I dare you," saith the LORD of Hosts.

I suppose we have enough time...

When I first began to tithe, it didn't feel such a difficult thing. I was beginning in "Corporate America," in 1984, in corporate sales, my income was commission-driven. I loved my church, but hadn't changed my giving patterns to catch up. My prospects for making more money were looking good, and taxwise it made sense to begin to look for a place to buy, moving out of the old brick apartment building at 160 East Ave., Norwalk, Connecticut. So my first wife and I went out with a realtor looking for a condo we could buy together, and for a number of reasons that project turned into a very painful one. By the time we got home I was beside myself with frustration, for a lot of reasons—not the

least of which was we didn't have nearly enough money for a down payment. I was so distraught I couldn't stand to be indoors (you've had that feeling) and burst outside for a walk and a most animated prayer session with God. I was out there walking and remonstrating probably 2 hours later. Yet once again I was trying to explain the matter to God, hurt feelings and all, how unfair it was, exasperated that He seemed not to be grasping the picture that I didn't have enough money. For one of the few times in my life, a bolt of silent lightning bypassed my eardrums and flashed directly into my spirit with perfect, unmistakable clarity.)

I heard, "You don't have enough because you are holding back from Me." (As if I would ever have come to that conclusion on my own.) I couldn't work out God's math: I didn't have enough because I was saving too much? Not giving enough away, to the church? How's that again?

Next I heard, "And how well has your way been working?" I had to admit, God had me there. I was the one so agitated; I was the one with no leg to stand on. I was the one with nothing to lose. Surprisingly, (for me) just like that, I said, "OK. I will begin to tithe next Sunday." I later discussed it with my wife, took my gross pre-tax income, divided it by ten, divided that by 52, and obediently put that in the plate next Sunday. I've never looked back.

Shortly after that, I was approached by a headhunter about a new sales opportunity, which in itself turned out to be a step up. Independently, and more to the point, about six weeks after I left my first company I received a commission check in the mail. I wasn't expecting it; someone at Donnelley Marketing had to OK it, and they were not a frivolous company. We were looking at an \$80,000 condo; we needed a 10% down payment of \$8000. We had \$3000 saved and the check was for just over \$5000. You think God had nothing to do with that check?

Since then, God has poured out blessing after blessing: but by the favor of God how would a guy like me end up with Trish? (Was it just a coincidence Vanguard University tracked her down and offered her the position she now enjoys, which helps our financial situation so nicely?) We have the two coolest kids you could imagine. Have you seen them lately? Do they look underfed to you? Do you think God will not figure out how to get them thru college, if that is His will for them? Do I look worried?

Sometimes God's gifts to us have not material; we lost big money when we had to sell our first home "at the bottom"—and it brought us wonderfully close together. Then the four of us we were hovering just over the poverty line (as a pastor) with one car there for several years—and we relied upon God more than ever. Sometimes the divine gifts come in challenging wrapping paper, no question.

I hope you hear me correctly. God is the faithful one; I've pretty much taken the path of least resistance. I'm a guy who knows to stick with a winning game. I am not promising that if you tithe for 2007 a gold Rolex, by the power of the Holy Spirit, will jump onto your wrist. We all know that God is sovereign; we do not "work" or leverage or manipulate God.

But God is faithful: He will open the windows of heaven for us, and pour out abundant gifts of all kinds to us and thru us and out to many others, as we put Him to the test in this. One of the things He asks is that we tithe.

Do you really have enough faith to bet against God?

Malachi 3:6 “For I the LORD do not change; that is why you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever 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?" Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, "How are we robbing You?" In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me--the whole nation of you!

Bring 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. I 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. Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight,” says the LORD of hosts.

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others. You blind guides! You strain out a gnat but swallow a camel!