

# Sermon Text for August 28, 2022

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

## ***Psalm 66:1-4, Malachi 3:8-12*** ***“We are talking about tithing”***

As many of you know, my father was a pastor who transitioned from churches in Delaware and New Jersey to working overseas as a missionary where he was well known in the church world for creating centers around the world where Catholics and Protestants could meet together and talk about what they had in common more than what differences they had. As a result of his name he would often be invited to churches to preach when they were celebrating Stewardship Sundays and so he would often preach on giving. I'll never forget as a kid walking into a church knowing that my dad was going to be preaching on giving to these strangers that we didn't know. I was a bit uncomfortable and so were they.

There tends to be a bit of an uncomfortable shifting in the seats when the pastor talks about your money and your resources and your finances. Stay off my lawn, this is my business, we would almost rather he talk about politics or the Cowboys, almost. Once a year I preach on stewardship as it relates to our finances and congratulations this is the Sunday. Maybe not a great Sunday with the picnic and me encouraging you to invite friends for this Sunday, but that's the way our 9 month Bible Challenge worked out as we find ourselves in the book of Malachi.

I do need to say that it is one area that I feel very confident in addressing. Not comfortable, mind you, but confident because our family growing up and now my family with a wife and three girls have lived it and we have stayed consistent and we have seen the results of tithing. We are talking about tithing, in case you were wondering. You have heard my story of the car seat. When Stacy and I first started our ministry we were missionaries in the Italian Waldensian Church and we made \$800 a month. We were pregnant with Rachel and they have a law that you can't leave the hospital without showing them a car seat where you will put the baby.

We didn't have the money at that time to buy a car seat but we went shopping anyway and found one we liked for about \$44. We prayed about it and without knowing it we received from a Sunday School class where I had served during seminary a check for \$44. One of my best friends in college was named Rachel who was a missionary kid and she was getting ready to go to college on her first day. She was with her family in her living room and they were praying together before she left. She was \$400 short on paying for her first semester but she was going to go anyway to see what would happen. As they were praying a knock came at the door and a

random stranger was there with an envelope and gave it to Rachel and said I'm just passing through town and I asked around and people said you all were missionaries. I like to help missionary families, use that as you like. You know how much was in there.

We could spend all day telling stories like these. But let's be clear, this yearly sermon on tithing is not meant to be a stewardship sermon. It is not meant to raise your giving for the sake of the church. I do everything in my power to help make you disciples of Jesus Christ. We read the Bible together because I believe that reading Scripture is a fundamental step in being a disciple of Jesus Christ because we can understand what it means to be a disciple when we read the Bible. Likewise, tithing makes you walk closer with Jesus because when you tithe you have to trust, tithing is simply an act of trust. Dallas Willard states in his book the Great Omission that you can be a Christian your entire life and never be a disciple.

You can be a Christian your entire life and never read the Bible, and never significantly, and never tithe. You can be a Christian your entire life and never be a disciple. Our goal together is not to be Christians, but to be disciples. You can believe that Jesus is your Savior and took away your sins, but never make him your Lord, your teacher, and you in turn truly follow him. Tithing, according to Malachi, is a first step in being restored to Jesus. Let's read.

## **READ**

Psalm 66 is a nice Psalm but we aren't really going to spend too much time in it. There is no real correlation to this Psalm and our reading in Malachi but it is nice to hear the joy, the celebration, the praise, and the thanksgiving for this Sunday. It is a Sunday that we are celebrating as we ought to every Sunday as we rejoice in the resurrection of our Savior. "Make a joyful noise to the Lord." Especially this being the first Sunday that we play the organ in a Sunday service.

Let's go to Malachi, the people of God have returned to the land. The temple has been rebuilt, the honeymoon is over and people are trying to figure out what does normal look like now? Does that sound familiar? They were wondering what is our first step in being restored to a right relationship with God after these centuries of being away from the land, and so, in essence, being away from God. In the verses previous to the ones we read we do read that God has not changed over this period of time that we have experienced.

This is so important to understand. We have been through so much during this time and so since we feel like everything has changed we can approach it with the false notion that God has changed as well since we have changed. No, vs.6 reminds us that God has not changed at all over this period of time. We have changed, but God has not. We then read in vs.7 that God

wants us to return to him and be restored. But the people don't know how. How do we return? How can we be restored to God? What are the steps what is the process?

Intuitively if we were to ask how can we get right with God, what is the first thing or what are the first steps that we have to take we would probably call out the good old favorites. Pray more, read the Bible more, reach out to your neighbor and help the poor and the destitute, that will begin the process of reconciliation with you and God and you will for sure feel closer to God. You know what Malachi says? You're not going to like this because all of those things that I said before we can do without any real impact on our lives, except maybe a bit of time. Malachi says tithe, begin with tithing as the first step of the process to get right with God.

If I say tithe 10% of what you bring home for the work of God through this church, that is measurable. That is something that you can actually quantify and measure. What a time to preach this sermon as the stock market is going out of wack, inflation while decreasing is still a serious problem, gas is so high that it is hard to afford. If you currently are not tithing then you may say there is no way that I can afford that now. I say to you, you can't afford not to do it, and Malachi explains that. Malachi calls it putting the Lord to the test.

Let's look at vs. 10 to explain that. Vs.10 is the real heart of these verses. What we find out about tithing is that it all comes down to trust. This is the key to it all. How much do we trust God in things that matter to us, and let's be honest, our financial well being matters to us on so many different levels. In vs.10 God says test me, try me out, see what happens when you do what I ask you to do, see what happens if you actually obey me. We've asked this question in Sunday School which is we know the promises of God and we know how to obey God, but why don't we do it? If I tell you that I can guarantee you that you will walk closer with God all your life and here are ways that this will happen, I guarantee it, why don't we do it?

In the same way God says in Malachi, test me, you don't believe that I will provide for you, you don't believe that I will take care of you, protect you, walk by your side as you struggle, pull you out of whatever difficulty you may find yourself in? Try me, I dare you, test me. Now, there is a danger in testing God when our hearts are not right before him. Annanias and Sapphira could tell you something about that if they were still alive. But we do have examples of Scripture where God asks His people to test him so that he can provide a miracle to strengthen their faith and their walk.

The prophet Isaiah asks Ahaz to ask for a sign, he refuses, but God provides a virgin who gives birth to the Savior of the world. Gideon asks if he can test God by placing fleece to see if it is dry or wet, and God allows him to. Moses asks for a sign and God provides it. Elijah asks

for fire to descend from heaven and the fire does much to the chagrin of the enemy prophets. Tithing is a sign of God's presence and it is a way that we are able to test whether God is on our side or not. I promise you, I promise you, God is on your side and you will experience God's presence in very real ways when you tithe.

Now, if we spend out money irresponsibly then we know that there will be consequences that do not fit into the trust that we have in God. This is part of having your heart in the right place. Galatians 6:7 states that God is not mocked, you will reap what you sow. Your actions have to reflect that your heart is in the right place. But in tithing God says I want to prove to you that I will protect you, I will provide for you, I will conquer your enemies.

We saw that over and over again in our ministry. When we were missionaries in Russia the church leadership made a decision to open a soup kitchen for single moms and their kids, a demographic group that we had already focused on so we already had a large client base, but we didn't have the money to do it. We only had half of what we need. But the session said let's go ahead and do it and see how God will provide. When I got home that evening I received a phone call from the German embassy, which knew nothing about our meeting, and said that they would contribute to this soup kitchen and it was exactly the amount we needed, about \$35,000. A similar thing happened here at the church when we decided to hire a full time youth director and the next day we received a letter that we were going to be receiving funds from an inheritance. That has happened twice this year.

Let me be clear. This is not a fundraiser. I am not speaking about tithing again so that our income will increase. I am speaking about tithing again so that we can trust God more and the more we trust God the more God can act in your life. You know that. The more you decide to trust God, the more you see God at work in your life. When we trust God less, we experience God less.

One year I preached on tithing in the church in Florida. I encouraged the congregation to tithe the month of January, just one month if they had not tithed before. February 1<sup>st</sup> a single mom who was a member came into my office and she was obviously emotional. I knew she scrimped and saved every month and simply was not able to make it. Oh no, I thought, what have I done. Pastor Bob, she said, for the past 5 years I have not had a single month where I haven't asked someone for help to help me tide me over for the month. I tried tithing and January was the first month in 5 years that I have been able to make ends meet on my own.

The more we trust, the more we see God at work. This is why Malachi was able to say that the first step in restoration, the first step in a new normal with God in our lives is tithing. So,

we are going to try this for the month of October. I know that many of you already tithe and so you understand the reason and the purpose behind it. But I'm guessing many of you do not. I want to encourage you to use the month of October as the month that you test God. Put God to the test in October, and tithe, see what God will do for you in the month of October. Talk to others in the church who have done this in the past where they were not tithing, and they did, and they changed their lives dramatically and are now walking closer with God as a result.

But listen to these words in II Corinthians 9:7. God loves a cheerful giver. I don't want you to do it if you can't do it cheerfully. I don't want to guilt you into it. If you are okay with being a Christian and not a disciple then this is not for you. This is for the purpose of building disciples. The promise of restoration and blessing is one we can claim and tithing plays an important role in that. Let's walk this journey together and see how God will respond. Amen.