

Sermon Text for April 21, 2024

By Rev. Robert K. Bronkema

Malachi 3:6-12, Matthew 10:1-15

“As you have received, so give”

What a month we have had. These last four Sundays have been unique in their own way. Three weeks ago we had Easter and packed the house with our celebration of the Resurrection. Remember that? He is Risen, He is Risen Indeed. Two weeks ago we had a visit from the Moderator of the General Assembly and we packed the house and the choir loft for that visit. There was a palpable presence of the Spirit that day with more than one of you saying you actually saw the presence of the Holy Spirit which manifested itself with a glow during the service. Presbyterians tend to shy away from that crazy talk, but I'm okay with it. What would people think of Paul today? I don't know what happened but I was going down the road to Damascus and I heard voices and so I decide to change my life completely.

Last week we had a powerful, and I mean powerful youth Sunday where we didn't see the future of the church, but rather the present. It is a great month to be a follower of Jesus Christ here at First Presbyterian Church. And now you have me. So, I'm going to take advantage of this wave of the Spirit which has been so powerful and take advantage on this day of Action here at this church to talk about one action that we all can take that Scripture points to as one of the most radical and one of the most sacrificial actions we can take as followers of Jesus, and that is tithing.

That's right, you may not realize it but you just walked into Stewardship Sunday here at First Presbyterian Church. Up until Covid we had one Stewardship Sunday a year and we haven't really done it since Covid. So on this Sunday when together as a church we will be taking concrete action together, we will address one way in which we are called to live out devotion to God. At this church on Stewardship Sunday we emphasize tithing. Tithing is arguably the most powerful action we can take having both a tremendous individual impact as well as an impact upon the community. I can think of nothing more significant than tithing that can impact both.

So, we are going to answer the question today of why tithe? This is all within the framework of Matthew 10 where we learn that because we have received freely, we should give freely. Three reasons why we should tithe: So that we can rely on God, so that we can thank God, and so that we obey God. Let's read.

READ

Why has it been so long since I have preached on stewardship and had a sermon completely devoted to our financial responsibilities to the Lord in the form of our giving of the tithe? Honestly, I had a bit of a guilty feeling knowing how much we all were struggling during Covid, some of us it hit us pretty hard financially. But that was a mistake on my part, I should have not stopped because how many times from behind this pulpit have I said that it is especially in those times that we have to turn to the Lord.

But I have experienced since I was a child the hush that came over the church when my dad talked about stewardship and that uncomfortable feeling that permeated the crowd. I didn't used to like talking about it, I still don't, but I do know that it is in and through tithing that we are able to see most clearly the hand of God. You have heard my stories so I'm not going to repeat them, at least not all of them.

The reason why you don't constantly hear us talking about the need for finances is because that is not the purpose of tithing. It is not to meet the needs of the congregation exclusively, but it is so that you can see and experience the presence of God in your tithing by God meeting your needs. I also work pretty hard to combat that stereotype that a lot of people have of churches which is all they want is your money and nothing else matters. I hope you know that is the furthest from the truth in this church. We don't want your money, we want you to walk closer with Jesus and that happens when you tithe.

Is there anything more powerful, more concrete, more visible that reflects the state of our relationship with Jesus than our tithing, or our lack of tithing? There is this often precarious relationship that we hold in tension in our lives between God and our finances. This is true in the Old Testament reading that we see for today as well. We find that the people had strayed from God for generations. Some of you are new to church, you stepped away, or you didn't grow up in the church. Others of you can point to generations of people who loved Jesus and have been involved in the life of the church.

For Malachi and the people of Israel they were those who didn't know God for generations. They wanted to come back to God and they wanted to rebuild the nation around them and rebuild their families around God. Just like we needed to and continue to rebuild the church after Covid. Let me take a small aside. There are a lot of people going around saying that God has to be more present in the nation today. I'm not completely convinced, simply because if you look closely those who are saying it the loudest have no church affiliation whatsoever. Beware of false prophets who say that we need more God in this nation because

their definition of God in this nation is not a Matthew 25 definition or a Matthew 5 definition of what he says on the Mt. of Beatitudes.

So the people ask Malachi, the prophet of the Lord, what do we need to do in order to walk closer with God? It would be as if there is a new family who is starting to attend church and they ask me, what do I need to do in order to walk closer with the Lord. What do you think I would tell them? I would tell them PSA: Pray, Read Scripture, and then Act. That isn't what Malachi says. The people ask: How do we return to God, a direct question. He gives them a direct answer and it is a very unexpected one. He tells the people you have to start by tithing.

Malachi jumps right to the Action part, which is what we are celebrating today, and he specifically says the action that you demonstrate when you tithe is total reliance upon God. There is nothing more powerful to express your love for God than tithing. In fact, look at vs.10, he tells the people, put God to the test. If you don't believe that God is on your side, if you want to see God on your side and experience him fully and completely, if you want to have a relationship with God like you have never had before, put him to the test and tithe.

What do you mean put him to the test? We have put God to the test before, haven't we as a congregation? There have been a handful of times that I have challenged you that if you currently are not tithing, then next month tithe and put God to the test. You know my story about that in Florida right? If not, see, you will hear one of the old stories, if someone hasn't attended her very long they may not have heard it. We did that in Florida, it was the month of January I believe. I said if you are not currently tithing then for the month of January I want you to tithe and I guarantee you that God will meet your need. Now, some ground rules, you aren't going to get rich. This isn't the prosperity Gospel. You have to live and spend wisely, if you disobey God and thumb your nose at God and go out to dinner every night and you have a \$300 TV bill, and you gamble \$500 a month then no, God is not going to meet your needs.

February rolled around and a single mom in the church asked to meet with me. I knew her story, the church had helped her out many times. She was a seamstress and an aide in a classroom with two little kids just trying to get by. She came to meet with me and as soon as she came into the office she broke down in tears. I thought to myself, Bob, what did you do? You have ruined her with your whole I Charles Barkley I guarantee that God will meet your need. She said Pastor Bob, every single month since I have been a single mom I have had to ask for help from someone to make ends meet. I tithed in January and for the first time in my life as a mother I didn't have to ask for help. Somehow, God provided for me.

Because she tithed she was able to see and experience in real time and in real life the power of the presence of God because we asked her to do something, and she did it, that made a difference in her life. As you have been freely given, so freely give. I want you to tithe for the month of May. Try it. What does that look like? Easy, if you bring home \$80,000 a year then every month you should be giving just under \$700 a month. If you bring in \$40,000 a year then you should be giving just under \$350 a month. If you are bringing in \$200,000 a year then you should be giving just under \$2,000 a month. It sounds like a lot if you are not doing it now, but trust me, you will experience the fullness of God if you try it, and that's what we are trying to do here, bring us closer to God.

We haven't gotten to Matthew yet and we are already past the length of typical sermon. But I am only preaching once in April so hang in there. As a church we find ourselves in a unique position. Financially we are in the best shape we have been in over these past 20 years. So why ask people to tithe when financially you are sound? Because this is not a fundraiser for the church. Look at vs.14. There is a part of me that thinks: If people in the church have heard your preach on tithing for 13 years and they still think you're trying to raise money for the church and they doubt your motive, which is to give them a Scriptural insight into how to walk closer with God, well, after some time you may want to transition and move on to another battle.

It is a topic that I feel so strongly about because I saw and lived the sacrifices that my parents made as they tithed and put us through college. I know what it is to tithe living on \$800 a month with two children. So why preach on tithing today, on this day of Action? Because tithing requires us to do three things. It forces us to rely on God, give thanks to God, and obey God. Let's look at relying on God. First of all, no one should coerce someone to generosity. You are either wanting to give, or you are not. You shouldn't give because I am telling you to give, you should give because you want to rely more on God.

When Jesus sends out the disciples he sends them out with only what they have, with nothing more. They were forced to rely upon God and God's provision along the way. And God did provide. I believe so strongly that Christian missionaries should live simply, free of the excesses of materialism. The same should be true for Christian pastors. I believe that pastors in our denomination are paid more than they should be. We have signed up for this not for the payment, but to rely upon God. The same is true not just for missionaries and pastors but also for followers in general. All of us are called to a simple lifestyle as a reflection of our reliance upon God and as a witness to the world.

Jesus loves me becomes more credible to the distraught mother when our food bank rescues her children from hunger. There can be no separation between preach and heal. Our actions, our lifestyles, have to match our teachings and our beliefs.

We tithe to give thanks to God. We know the verses in II Corinthians 9:6-8 where Paul says that God loves a cheerful giver. During Covid when we began doing some things differently it was because we knew how faithful God had been to us as a church. When we started the CIF when we were looking to give \$1500 grants to members of the church who were in need, who had lost their job etc. it was to fulfill Jesus' command to go to the lost sheep of Israel, to handle those within the church first. But we have expanded well beyond that, but it was a result of wanting to give thanks to God for God's provision. God took care of us during Covid, and God takes care of us now and we are thankful.

None of us could have predicted the generosity of this church in the bequests that we have received. Again, the gratefulness of people of this church to include the church in their wills is not something that we can foresee. But the giving to the church out of thankfulness is one aspect of tithing that can be reflected both in our day to day lives and when we move into the kingdom of God.

So we tithe to rely on God. We tithe to give thanks to God, and finally, we tithe to obey God. The title of this sermon is taken from vs.8 where Jesus commands us to give freely just as we have been given to freely. We have been blessed abundantly as a church and so as a result we are able to bless others abundantly. Isn't that true of you as an individual? You know that you have been blessed, so why not obey God's Word in your tithe when you know that the result of that will be to receive even more blessing. Again, not the prosperity Gospel, but can you think of any other greater blessing than to experience how God provides the means for generosity? When we obey God then it makes our words more believable. This is true as a church and as individuals.

Stewardship Sunday isn't easy for me. Not because we don't tithe, we do and we have our whole life. But because I know each one of you and you know me and you know that my agenda has never been to try to raise as much money as possible for the church. No, my agenda is to give us as close of a walk with Jesus as possible. My experience has been that there is no greater visible proof of the presence of God than when we live our lives as tithers. Our mission and our action today is a continuation of Jesus mission and action.

We stand on the shoulders today of those who went before us in this church. As we have received, so we should give. Now let's go and do something. Amen.