

BUILDING BLOCKS: TITHES AND OFFERINGS

Sermon written by Martha-Jean Fitch

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TEXT: Malachi 3:6-12

One of my favorite “reality” shows to watch is home improvement shows, where they show homes that are dilapidated or falling down, and they are repaired and remodeled and are made beautiful! One show I particularly like is called the “Fixers” where a group of four expert builders travel the world, and work with volunteers to build, re-build or renovate a desperately needed structure in the community. They count it their mission to make the world a better place, one build at a time. I love to see how each brick and piece of wood – each coat of paint, all works together to build a beautiful new facility to help people in their community – reaching out to people in need. It is always exciting to get to the “reveal day” when the final job is shown to the leaders of the organization. To see their amazed and grateful response to the gift they are being given.

Well, today is the sixth week we have been on the sermon series: Building Blocks – looking for those things that make for a healthy and strong church and a faithful Christian. And we have learned that the foundation of the church - and our lives – truly is Jesus Christ! He is the cornerstone of the building – the church’s one foundation!

We use building blocks – just as the early church did – to build upon that foundation: building blocks of discipleship, evangelism and fellowship. Building blocks of prayer and praise, of sharing of our talents and spiritual gifts.

Today we turn to another building block that was so vital to the early church – and it was that of generosity and the sharing of their finances to help those in need.

Because we have been given a wonderful life, created by God ... and given the gift of eternal life through Jesus Christ and His death on the cross...overwhelming love has been poured into our lives. Now we are called to respond by sharing His love with others. Much as the incredible blessings and love have filled up our lives – we are called to pour out love for others. As we build this life of stewardship, it is not just the inward growth God is calling us to– it is the outward growth as well – reaching out to others around us and doing good. That is the building block for a healthy church – and living as a faithful disciple. The key that will be pleasing to God and bring Him joy...and bring us joy as well.

Since the days of Abraham, a building block of giving has been to return a tithe or 10% of one’s income in gratitude for all that God has given and done for us. When we tithe – we are giving as a response to our growing relationship with God. It is an outward response to the inward work of the Holy Spirit in us. It is a recognition that we indeed have been blessed by a loving God and want to join Him in kingdom building process...and that we want to seek God first in our lives – including in our finances. It represents our faith relationship with God and our trust in Him. When we are giving, as the Lord commanded – a 10% tithe to the work and

ministry of God's kingdom - our souls are refreshed and renewed as we receive the wonderful blessings of God.

Yes – we have received incredible blessings from God and our best response in gratitude is to give – rather than keep to ourselves.

The land of Israel gives us a perfect illustration of this. You might remember hearing before about the Jordan River running through the eastern border of Israel, with two big bodies of water on either end – the Sea of Galilee and the Dead Sea. In the north is the Sea of Galilee.

The Sea of Galilee is an incredible sight – much bigger than I imagined. The water is blue and it's full of fish. Many birds live near it and children play in the water. And for miles around, farmers use its water to grow crops.

The Sea of Galilee is truly a living body of water. It receives its water from a river in the north and gives it to a river to the south.

The other sea is the Dead Sea. Its water is murky and undrinkable. There is so much salt content in the water that nothing can live in it. No fish swim in its water. No trees grow on its shoreline. No birds can be heard nearby. The Dead Sea receives its water from the river in the north. But it doesn't give its water to any river in the south.

Both the Dead Sea and the Sea of Galilee receive the same abundant water, from the same river ... but there is a major difference between the two. The Sea of Galilee receives – but also has an outlet for the water to flow through ... it gives. But there is no outlet in the Dead Sea – and so it just accumulates water, getting more and more salty and less hospitable to life ... all because it does not give.

This is a great image for us to think about. Which are we like – the Sea of Galilee or the Dead Sea? God is pouring His life-giving water into our lives – and how much of it is being allowed to go forth in a life-giving flow?

Much like the Sea of Galilee that is full of life when it gives, I believe that we, too, are full of life and abundant blessings when we are tithing! But when we start accumulating and hoarding – refusing to tithe, we can become as dead and lifeless as the Dead Sea.

This was the message I think the Lord wanted the Israelites to understand in our Scripture reading today. Turn with me to Malachi – the last book of the Old Testament and let's learn more about what these words mean for us. As we go through the text, think about how these words could apply to us in the 21st century.

Malachi was written around 432 BC when the Jewish people were back in Jerusalem after being in exile in Babylon. They had worked hard at rebuilding Jerusalem. And with grand ceremony, they dedicated the newly built wall and committed themselves to serve God faithfully. It was a great day of renewal.

But soon the revival fires had dwindled to smoldering embers. Twelve years later, the people had forgotten all about obeying God's commandments. Instead, they were filled with corruption and indifference. It was a period of great backsliding...even to the point that the people were not tithing anymore or giving to help the ministry of the Temple.

So, God addresses the people in Malachi 3. Look at verse 8. He says: "*You are robbing me...in holding back your tithes and offerings! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to test; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.*" (Malachi 3:8 & 10) The storehouse was a place in the temple for storing grain and other food given as tithes. In a way, God was saying here, "bring your tithes to the church – to my house – and put me to the test – see if I don't fill your lives to overflowing with many blessings."

But they weren't bringing in the tithe. They were too worried and afraid. They were struggling with some of the same you and I struggle with when it comes to giving. They were facing heavy taxation from the Persians. And perhaps they were thinking: Our budget is so tight and if we give our tithes and offerings, we're not going to have enough money to pay our taxes. Or if we pay our taxes, we're not going to have enough money to eat.

We worry about the local economy and the price of gasoline. We worry about things like the raising of the debt limit – and a recession. But as God said to the Israelites, He says also to us today: *I challenge you to test me. Follow through on your commitment to tithe and see whether or not I will bless you. Give at a level that will test my ability to bring blessing to your life.*

Notice that God says – "put me to the test." This is the only place in the Bible that God calls us to test Him. We are actually told not to test God ... or to try and tempt Him in other areas of life. But in this – in tithing – we are told to test God. We are to bring in the tithe to the church and just see if God won't "open the windows of heaven" and flood down blessings galore on us! So why would we settle for raindrops when God wants to shower us with blessings?

And this is not just an Old Testament promise. Jesus said in Luke 6:38 – "*Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you.*"

I read this week that this verse is described as the blessing boomerang. As we give – it will come back to us – overflowing!

Ray Pritchard interprets these passages with these thoughts.

1. "*Generous people are not people with large bank accounts – they are folks with a large view of God!*" We often think people are generous because they are rich. That really isn't true. Poor people can be very generous and rich people can be stingy. It really has to do with your view God. Pritchard says: "*If your God is big, you will be generous. If he is small, you will be stingy. If you struggle with your giving, it may be*

because your God is too small. The bigger your God, the easier it will be for you to give."

2. *"When we give generously, we do so because we truly believe God will reward us one way or the other."* These passages in Malachi and Luke both point to the blessings we will receive if we are generous in our giving. The problem lies in that we often think the blessings will only be material blessings. But that really isn't always the case. Other blessings might be an answered prayer, a newfound strength and joy, more opportunities to give and touch another's life. The list is really endless of the ways that God can bless us when we give.
3. *"Generous givers understand the shovel principle."* You know:
"I shovel it out and God shovels it in, and he's got a bigger shovel than I do." His giving always exceeds ours – for you can't outgive God.
4. *Generous giving is a testimony to an unbelieving world that our God is alive and well today.* We show the world that our trust in God as our Provider – who gives abundantly. Pritchard says, *"Generous giving is an excellent testimony because it's a way to say to the watching world: 'There's a lot more where that came from.' Only when we say it, we're not talking about our investment strategy, we're talking about the God of the universe who has promised to care for his children."*¹

That is truly how John Huyler felt. John was a very successful candy maker who loved the Lord. As he began his career, he took on the God's challenge from Malachi 3:10 and decided to give him a tenth of his income. Every week, when he received a paycheck, he would set aside his 10% and place it in an account he designated as "MP". When anyone asked what the strange label meant, they were told that it stood for "my partner". As he kept God first in his mind and all his transactions, his industry grew at a phenomenal rate and each week the Lord's treasury received increasingly large sums. And with this money, many churches and Christian organizations were incredibly blessed, and he never wanted any word of thanks for the gift rather he wanted them to offer praise to God alone. "After all, Huyler said, "the money isn't mine. It's the Lord's!"

Do you have Jesus says you're partner in your life -- in your business -- in your finances? Is He walking by your side, guiding you and all your decision making? Have you given him first place in your life?

That is the building block you need for a strong life of faith – and it is truly the building blocks we need to grow as a Spirit-filled, Christ-centered church.

In your bulletin today, you found a pledge card where you can share your commitment to the Lord for this coming year – on how you will give to the ministry of His church. Prayerfully consider how God is calling you – challenging you to put Him first in your giving. And then when we have our offering this morning, I invite you to place your card in the offering plate – as an act of worship and dedication.

PRAYER

Let us pray:

O God, as our heads are bowed and our eyes are closed, we pause to reflect on the challenging words You have given us today in our Scripture readings. We must admit that they are not always easy ones to hear. Forgive us for the times when we have put our bills and our expenses and our shopping ahead of you...and literally have given you the leftovers. Help us God to put you first. Help us to follow your commands and trust in Your promises as we present our tithes and offerings to you. We dedicate our giving and our living to You, O God – as we pray in the name of Christ our Lord, AMEN

INVITATION

Won't you come today and give your life to Him? Come and confess your faith in Him. Rededicate your life to living for Him. Won't you come now as we stand and sing?

RESOURCE

¹Ray Pritchard, "*The First Law of Christian Giving*", November 2, 1996.
<https://www.keepbelieving.com/sermon/the-first-law-of-christian-giving/>