

The Indescribable Gift

WEEKLY BIBLE STUDY

October 25, 2009

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Malachi 3:6-12 (NRSV)

⁶For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.

⁷Ever 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?”

⁸Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings! ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰Bring 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. ¹¹I 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. ¹²Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

2 Corinthians 9:6-15 (NRSV)

⁶The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸And God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work. ⁹As it is written,

“He scatters abroad, he gives to the poor;
his righteousness endures forever.”

¹⁰He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹You will be enriched in every way for your great generosity, which will produce thanksgiving to God through us; ¹²for the rendering of this ministry not only supplies the needs of the saints but also overflows with many thanksgivings to God. ¹³Through the testing of this ministry you glorify God by your obedience to the confession of the gospel of Christ and by the generosity of your sharing with them and with all others, ¹⁴while they long for you and pray for you because of the surpassing grace of God that he has given you. ¹⁵Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

Paul speaks of being a cheerful giver. But perhaps the place to begin is to ask ourselves whether we are cheerful receivers. Do we truly appreciate all that God has given even us, even as we are challenged to return to God a small portion of what we hold in trust?

When we come to biblical passages such as today’s, it is easy for us to see in them the promise of a bargain with God. We give; we get. Give more, get more. It is just a short step to the so-called “Prosperity Gospel” that distorts and misrepresents the nature of God’s promises. We may not really believe that if we just send in more money, our bank account will soon be overflowing with riches, but we surely are attracted to the illusion of control that this “deal striking” offers us. We love being in the driving seat. The truth is that we are much happier (cheerful!) as givers than as receivers. Ask yourself . . . Are you better at receiving a compliment or giving one? How would you respond to a stranger who came up to you and tried to give you a gift? Would you think the person a little nutty? Would you immediately try to figure out the angles? Would you try to reject it for fear of obligations that you might incur by accepting the gift?

Many of us (most?) would answer yes to these questions. We like being in charge – and givers are just that.

However, a small child accepts a gift with open arms, giving no thought to any future obligations! Indeed, we consciously teach our children to be suspicious of such gifts because we understand that we live in a flawed world where predators can take advantage of small children's openness and cheerful receiving. We teach our children that it is better to give than to receive as we try to move our children from selfishness to selflessness. But we lose something along the way. We lose our ability to rightly see and appreciate God's gifts to us. We lose the gift of being cheerful receivers.

Jesus once said to crowds who were keeping small children away, "Whoever does not receive the kingdom of God as a little child will never enter it" (Luke 18:5-7). Christians sometimes, and wrongly, assume that Jesus is saying that we need to be as simple or naïve or unlearned as children when we approach the Good News.

Instead, as Walter Liefeld notes, Jesus is talking about the attitude "essential for receiving God's grace. It is not age per se that is in view, but childlike qualities such as trust, openness, and the absence of holier-than-thou attitudes."¹ And this is why it so hard for us adults. We've worked hard for what we've got. We've earned it – the old-fashioned way. The idea that what we have is a gift from God, that we've *received it in trust*, is counter to the worldview most of us actually live. Frankly, this very problem underlies the difficulty so many of us have in grasping the essentials of the Christian proclamation. This problem explains why a majority of Christians mistakenly believe that we earn our way into heaven, into eternal communion with God.

The hard part for us is acknowledging that God's gift of grace is exactly that – a gift freely given, that we neither earn nor deserve. A traditional definition of God's grace is "unmerited favor." If we deserve (merit) what God gives us, it is not a gift, but a payment or reward. Children can receive God's gifts without feeling like they earned it or deserve it – they just accept it. But this is pretty hard for hard-driving, high-achieving Americans who believe that there is no such thing as a free lunch and that we get what we pay for.

Like the video we saw in worship last week put it, "Dude, he brought the pie!" This is where we begin. This is the context for all our notions of money and God. We talk about our "financial giving" a lot, but a more accurate term would be "financial returning."

And the ancient Jews knew this as well or better than we do.

A pouring out of our life

To reiterate, it is a mistake to read a passage like today's from Malachi as some sort of tit-for-tat bargain between God and his people. Pay the tithe and I'll reward you with lots of blessings. Send in your money and you'll get that promotion or new job. The Jews to whom Malachi was speaking were keenly aware that God had rescued them from slavery in Egypt and returned them captivity in Babylon without them doing anything to deserve it. It was all simply God's gift – not a bargain.

As Elizabeth Achtemeier writes, "That crude bargain is not what is involved here when Judah is admonished to 'bring the full tithe' (v. 10). Motivating and accompanying all true gifts to God is the pouring out of our life, our love, our all. And when we so present ourselves, a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, it is surely true that heaven's richest bounties are heaped upon us. . . . We find ourselves given graces anew

¹ From Walter Liefeld's commentary on Luke in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, F.E. Gaebelin, Editor, 1984, Zondervan

every morning, too numerous to count—the glories of a good creation; joy in daily work; patience, kindness, self-control in the fellowship we have with one another; release from guilt and anxiety and dread of death; and above all, peace with God, who winds us round and round with mercy, as if with air. The Kingdom’s goal—the glory of God—becomes our chief occupation, and we find all these other things added to us as well.”

Isn't the tithe just an Old Testament practice?

No. The biblical tithe was woven into the religious practices of God’s people. There were offerings and taxes for a variety of purposes. But the tithe was for sacred purposes, given for God’s priests, for the temple, and some even for the poor. Jesus didn’t eliminate the tithe. Why would he? Granted Jesus took to task those who prided themselves on tithing even of their spices while ignoring the larger matters of loving God and neighbor (Matthew 23:23-24). But Jesus kept God’s Law and would certainly have given his tithe, as would have Peter, Andrew, and the rest. Not out of pride or obligation. They would have given out their love for God, knowing that their giving was the incarnation of their faith.

Reaping and sowing

Here’s an analogy that may help get us out of the bargaining mindset. In today’s passage from 2 Corinthians, Paul writes that “the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully” (9:6).

What if you went out every day with one goal in mind – to spread around as much kindness and joy as you could. What do you think you would reap from such sowing? I think we know the answer.

So it is even with our tithe. Our financial giving (returning!) is an embodiment of our faith, as is the kindness we extend to others, and the forgiveness that we graciously pour out even when it is not asked for or deserved.

An emergency fund

An example of giving as an incarnation of faith is evident in Paul’s dealings with the Christians in Corinth, Greece. Though his relationship with these Christians has been contentious at times, their commitment to the gospel was evident in their enthusiastic response to Paul’s collection for the poor among the Jewish-Christians in Jerusalem. Paul has been amassing the collection from the various Christian communities he either founded or visited during his missionary journeys.

For Paul, this collection is the concrete expression of unity among the Jewish- and Gentile-Christians. It is an expression of reciprocity. It is a matter for their hearts. The Gentile-Christians have been grafted onto the tree of faith whose roots are the Jews (Romans 11:17-24) and now these Gentile communities in Asia Minor and Greece can reciprocate this gift by caring for the poor in Jerusalem’s Christian community, where all the Christians are Jews who have embraced Jesus as Messiah and Lord.

But now, the Corinthians’ earlier enthusiasm to help out with Paul’s collection has flagged. So Paul writes urging that they finish what they started. He doesn’t command them to do anything, though I suspect he feels like he could. Rather, Paul lifts up to them the generous act of Christ who became poor so that they might become rich (2 Cor 8:9), evoking Jesus’ own words about storing up treasures in heaven. For Paul, this generosity is part of the calculus of love. It is simply how it works. Thankfulness begetting thankfulness. Generosity begetting generosity. Blessing begetting blessing.

Those who expect to participate in God’s great harvest are expected to understand about reaping and sowing in the light of God’s grace, his “indefinable gift.”

Applying the Biblical Teachings on Tithing Reflections by Rev. Michael Reeves

“There are some necessary observations as we begin to make application of this lesson to our lives. First, tithing is neither the threshold for giving for most people nor should it be a ceiling. Working toward the tithe, committing to the tithe, and giving beyond the tithe represent the journey of financial responsibility for a disciple. Most people who give to the church give to other worthy causes as well. Giving a tenth of annual income is not the maximum from which all giving should be determined. The question here is not what the minimum expectation is, but understanding the biblical expectation. Multiple tithes were given in the Old Testament in a time of an impoverished nation with a tax burden. We live in a time of the greatest explosion of discretionary income in the history of the world. It is hard in these circumstances to rationalize giving less to the church than a tithe. The practical issue is how we manifest our priorities. If we spend or commit through personal indebtedness our discretionary income to our personal consumption, then we start to develop a theology of scarcity. We inevitably begin thinking about giving from what is left over, not the first fruits of our labor. While churches have often expressed their ‘need’ for funding, the motivation for giving in our Methodist belief system is that giving is a part of our discipleship.”

“There are also some personal expressions that are generally not biblical or helpful. One is to designate tithing to specific projects or ministries. That action suggests a lack of trust in church leadership and in God to direct. The practical issue is that few designations come in for things like utilities, insurance and custodial service. Another curious response is the idea of ‘withholding’ the tithe because of a point of disagreement about something within the community of faith. The guidelines for solving conflict are found in Matthew 18 and there is not a biblical basis for such withholding. Finally, St Andrew has a finance committee of lay leaders nominated and elected each year in accordance with the Book of Discipline that provides oversight. The financial staff manage the daily financial operations and an independent audit is completed every year and is available for review upon request.”

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

Rev. Michael Reeves has provided us with some very thought-provoking questions about faith and money. Any of these could generate a lively and fruitful discussion. Use them in your classes, small groups, or even over dinner!

1. What is the most generous act of which I have been the recipient? What was my reaction and why?
2. When has God allowed me to practice an act of unusual generosity and what were the results and why?
3. Who is the most generous person I know? How has that person expressed his or her generosity?
4. How do I want to be remembered?
5. What are my true values?
6. What I like most about money is _____. What I like least about money is _____.
7. God is helping me deal with my love of money by _____.
8. Am I willing to make changes in the way I relate to money as I listen to God’s voice in my life?

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Monday, Genesis 2:4b-25 God creates everything and gives humanity a paradise.</p>	<p>Tuesday, Psalm 100 & 1 Chronicles 29:10-19 It is God who made us and we are completely dependent on him.</p>
<p>Wednesday, Luke 18:9-14 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector</p>	<p>Thursday, Luke 18:18-30 Jesus and the rich young ruler</p>
<p>Friday, 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 Paul knows that all he is and has is a gift from God (the grace of God)</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer List</p>

Encounter

a time for fellowship, worship, and learning
every Wednesday evening at 6:45 in Wesley Hall

>>>This Wednesday (Oct 28): Mark 11-12<<<

Jesus arrives in Jerusalem to adoring crowds, but his conflict with the temple leadership and the Pharisees turns white hot.

A few faq's

Do I need to be there each week to make sense of the lesson?

- No. Though we will be in a book of the Bible, each week's sermon/lesson will stand on its own. We know that many people will come to **Encounter** when they've had to miss church on the weekend. In fact, we hope you will make that your regular practice.

Will the lessons be posted on-line?

- Yes. Each week, the audio will be posted along with the weekend's sermons at www.standrewumc.org/worship/sermonsonline.

Head for the Hills! 2012 is coming!

**A new three-part series in Scott's class at 11:00 in Festival Hall
Beginning Next Sunday, Nov 1**

Movies, Discovery Channel, the History Channel. All of a sudden it seems that talk of the world ending in 2012 is everywhere. So . . . it is time again for some biblical truth about prophecy and the end times.

Nov 1 - *The Truth about 2012*

Nov 8 - *The History of the Future*

Nov 15 - *Apocalypse Then*

Sermon Notes
