

Deuteronomy 14:28-29 (NRSV)

²⁸Every third year you shall bring out the full tithe of your produce for that year, and store it within your towns; ²⁹the Levites, because they have no allotment or inheritance with you, as well as the resident aliens, the orphans, and the widows in your towns, may come and eat their fill so that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work that you undertake.

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 8:1-7 (The Message)

Now, friends, I want to report on the surprising and generous ways in which God is working in the churches in Macedonia province. Fierce troubles came down on the people of those churches, pushing them to the very limit. The trial exposed their true colors: They were incredibly happy, though desperately poor. The pressure triggered something totally unexpected: an outpouring of pure and generous gifts. I was there and saw it for myself. They gave offerings of whatever they could—far more than they could afford!—pleading for the privilege of helping out in the relief of poor Christians.

This was totally spontaneous, entirely their own idea, and caught us completely off guard. What explains it was that they had first given themselves unreservedly to God and to us. The other giving simply flowed out of the purposes of God working in their lives. That's what prompted us to ask Titus to bring the relief offering to your attention, so that what was so well begun could be finished up. You do so well in so many things—you trust God, you're articulate, you're insightful, you're passionate, you love us—now, do your best in this, too.

"In God We Trust." Our giving is the concrete embodiment of that 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 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 difficult 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.

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. The tithe was an act of gratitude in response to all that God had done.

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 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."

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

Reaping and sowing

Here's an analogy that may help get us out of the bargaining mindset and into the gratitude 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. Our giving is our faith made concrete.

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.

Our giving for God's work is a joyous duty that is bathed in the light of God's love, so much so it doesn't really feel like a duty or obligation at all. And, I suppose, that is just as it should be!

Daily Bible Readings

More on giving for God

Monday, Genesis 2:4b-25 God creates everything and gives humanity a paradise.

Tuesday, Psalm 100 & 1 Chronicles 29:10-19 It is God who made us and we are completely dependent on him.

Wednesday, Luke 18:9-14 The parable of the Pharisee and the tax collector

Thursday, Luke 18:18-30 Jesus and the rich young ruler

Friday, 1 Corinthians 15:3-11 Paul knows that all he is and has is a gift from God (the grace of God)

Saturday, Acts 4:32-37 The first believers sell what they have to make sure that the whole community is fed and housed and clothed.

Scott Engle's Bible Classes

Monday Evening Class

We are studying the book of Acts.

Meets from 7:00 to 8:15 in Piro Hall

Tuesday Lunchtime Class

We are studying the book of Kings (1&2).

Meets from 11:45 to 1:00 in Piro Hall

About the weekday classes:

Join us whenever you can. Each week's lesson stands on its own. This is very "drop-in." Bring something to eat if you like. Bring a study Bible.

On occasion Scott must cancel class, so if you are coming for the first time, you can check www.scottengle.org to make sure the class is meeting.

Scott's 10:50 Sunday Class in Smith Worship Center

This is a large, lecture-oriented class open to all ages.

Current series: *The Virtues*

For Advent: Discovering the Good News in *A Christmas Carol*