

16. We believe in tithing as God's financial plan.

(Transcript of message preached by Pastor Rick Minett on July 17, 2005 at Grace Community Church)

“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this,” says the Lord of hosts, ‘If I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes...’” (Malachi 3:10-11).

People have the tendency of tightening up and breaking out in a cold sweat whenever they hear a message on tithing, but please don't. Just relax! We are going to have fun together as we discover some rich truths from God's Word, and there won't be any gimmicks or guilt-trips along the way. For example, a pastor at a Baptist Church in a little town in Kentucky was having trouble getting his people to give, so one Sunday he announced from the pulpit: “Before we pass the offering bags, it's been brought to my attention that someone, possibly from this congregation, stole some chickens from Bro. Johnson's henhouse. I have but one request. If you are the guilty party please refrain from giving today; the Lord doesn't need money from a thief!” The offering was taken and for the first time in the history of the church everyone in attendance put something in.

Tithing = Risk

Let me say right up front that it's important that we understand that God has no hang-up over money. The problem is our utility of it. He owns it all anyway and we are merely stewards of His property while we take this extremely brief journey from birth to eternity called life. Frankly, it isn't the 10% that belongs to God, it's the 100%! Everything we have belongs to Him. Intelligent people recognize that they probably have far more than they need; probably even more than they desire. So what is the real issue? In a word, it's an issue of trust. Are we willing to trust God, His Word and His principles for spiritual life? In other words, are we really willing to take the risk and respond positively to His mandates relative to money and giving?

Risk is part and parcel of life, isn't it? Hundreds of thousands of people annually shoot the rapids down the Colorado River; that involves risk, doesn't it? Tens of thousands hang-glide each year; that involves risk, doesn't it? Bungee jumping has become a huge craze in the past 20 years; that involves risk, doesn't it? And hundreds of thousands brave the Katy Freeway each year; that involves risk, doesn't it? Risk taking is part and parcel of life and it is part and parcel of spiritual life as well. Hudson Taylor, the great man of faith who founded the China Inland Mission, said, "Unless there is an element of risk in our exploits for God, there is no need for faith." It may be true that no one ever stubs his or her toe while standing still, but who wants to spend their life standing still? I like what someone once wrote: “There was a very cautious man who never laughed or played; he never risked, he never tried; he never sang or prayed. And when one day he passed away, his insurance was denied; for since he never ‘really’ lived, they claimed he never died!” To live is to take risks! To serve Christ is to take risks!

For instance, Jesus told a story in Matthew 25 that is most often referred to as the “Parable of the Talents.” In it, He spoke of three different kinds of people and He encouraged them to take a risk with their money, and what we learn as we read the story is that two of them did. Two of them put their money to work, invested it, and accepted the challenge of their master; and by doing so, two talents became four and five became ten. And as we read further in the story we discover that the master commended two men, but condemned one. He commended the two that were willing to take a risk and accept his challenge, but he condemned that one who refused to take a risk. That man buried his money in the ground, and because he did, he was chastised very severely.

You may be a “Five Talent Person.” Everything about you is more—more money, more expectations, more opportunity... But with that you also realize comes more responsibility, more pressure, more temptations... There are always two sides to every coin, isn't there? When it comes to money, Scripture reminds of the danger of wealth. It tells us that it's “*easier for a camel to go through the eye of the needle than for a rich man to enter the kingdom of God*” (Luke 18:25). But that doesn't mean God is opposed to people becoming rich. Matter of fact, one of the heroes in this story in Matthew 25 is the man with the most money. To him, his master says, “*Well done, good and faithful servant, you were faithful over a few things, I will make you ruler over many things. Enter into the joy of your lord*” (Matthew 25:21). Now here's the challenge to “five-talent” people: The Lord wants you to take a risk investing in eternity! Because you have been so richly and bountifully blessed, your giving should be that way as well. Jesus said that when we lay up our treasures on earth they will be destroyed, but when we lay up our treasures in heaven they can never be destroyed. And then He reminds us that where our treasure is, so is our heart. I believe that five talent people are five talent people for a purpose, in order that they might be a tremendous blessing to the Kingdom of God, the proclamation of the Gospel, and gathering of the harvest.

You may be a “Two Talent Person.” You aren't wealthy by the standards of “Forbes” magazine, you don't have millions invested around the world, but you live a comfortable life and you pay your bills. I would guess that churches are filled with more two-talent people than any other kind. And two talent people face two temptations. First, if they aren't careful, they resent five-talent people. Paul told the Romans to “*rejoice with those who rejoice*” (Romans 12:15). But instead of doing that, some folks become resentful and bitter and envious when they compare their lives to the lives of five talent people. And worse yet, they become competitive. There's an old term called “Keeping up with the Joneses”—which usually translates to: “I'm up to my eyeballs in debt!” As Will Rogers said, “Too many people spend money they don't have, to buy things that they don't need; to impress people they don't like.”

The second temptation for two-talent people is that, if they are not careful, they will look down upon one talent people—feeling superior to them. But our worth isn't measured by our wealth; it's measured by our character. By His own admission, Jesus said that birds have their nests and foxes have their holes, but He didn't even own a place to lay His head. But He was the greatest person that ever lived. And the reason that He was the greatest man that ever lived was because He was absolutely faithful and obedient to the will and the word of His Father. In reality, the Parable of the Talents isn't about money; it's about faithfulness and obedience. Did the five-talent man receive a greater reward than the two-talent man? No! Both of them heard the words: *“Well done, good and faithful servant; you have been faithful...”* Had the one-talent man been faithful to his master's word, he would have received the same reward as the other two.

Consider the one-talent man. He's described as fearful, lazy, unimaginative, and full of self-pity. He said things like this: “I was afraid... I knew you were a hard man...” And he heard things like this: “You wicked and lazy servant... At least you should have deposited my money in the bank so I could have gained some interest...”

So Jesus covers the economic gambit here: The rich, the middle-income and the poor. And my question is this: Which one, which group was exempt from practicing God's financial principles? The answer—no one! Not even the poor, the unemployed, or those on a fixed income. Need proof? What about the woman who came to the Temple and gave everything she had? It wasn't much, only two mites, less than a penny by our standards. She wasn't just poor—she was dirt poor! But read the story in Luke 21 and you won't find Jesus rushing to stop her, saying, “Madam, you shouldn't do that. That's all you have! You can't afford to give those two mites!” Conversely, He commends her! He uses her as an object lesson; an example for us to follow. And the lesson was essentially this: Everyone else was giving out of their abundance, but she was giving out of her need. She was the only one willing to take a risk! So God challenges us to take a risk and trust Him, but when we trust Him is there really any risk?

Tithing = Responsibility

According to several research groups, only a small percentage of evangelical Christians tithe even though nearly half of the same group says that God is the most important thing in their lives. For several years we supported a ministry in Romania and during that time we became very aware that most Christians in Romania don't have a whole lot by worldly standards. However, we are told that the vast majority of Christians in Romania believe they should tithe simply because they believe it's scriptural. But, and here's the ironic twist, their government only allows them to give 2.5% of their income to the church, so these Romanian Christians are constantly searching for loopholes in the law so that they can give 10%. They have less—but they are searching for ways to give more. We have more and even get tax breaks for our giving, yet the vast percentage of American Christians are looking for loopholes in Scripture so they can give less. What a sad commentary!

I hate to be a bearer of bad news, but as far as I know there are no loopholes in Scripture when it comes to the subject of tithing. People will say, “But the New Testament doesn't specifically talk about the tithe the same way the Old Testament does, so that must mean this practice was abolished since we don't live under the Law, but under grace.” But that's an incorrect assumption for a variety of reasons.

First, Jesus talked a great deal about money and our utility of it. Matter of fact, nearly two-thirds of His parables had to do with money, giving and stewardship. In Matthew 23:23, Jesus said, *“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe...”* but He goes on to say that they neglect justice, mercy, and faith. And Jesus concludes, *“These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”* So Jesus is essentially saying, “Continue giving the tenth, because that's the right thing to do; but also live a life filled with justice, mercy and faith, because that's the right thing to do as well.”

Secondly, what we often forget is that tithing didn't originate with the establishment of the Law. It preceded the Law. Nearly 400 years before the Law was ever given, Abraham offered the tithes of his increase to the Lord (Genesis 14:2) and one can go back even further to Abel (Genesis 4:4) who brought the “firstfruits” to the Lord.

Thirdly, Hebrews 7 clearly speaks of Abraham's giving and then presents him as an example for the New Testament believer to follow. Verses 1-3 speak about Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High God, and twice (in verses 2 and 4) it reminds the reader that Abraham gave a tenth of all that he had to Melchizedek. Jack Hayford, as he so often does, sums it up as well as it can be said. He says, “The principle of the tithe precedes the Law, it penetrates the Law, and it exceeds the Law. Abraham is pictured in the Bible, New and Old Testament, as the model of faith—and clearly the Bible tells us that Abraham tithed.” So again, there are no loopholes. There is a clear scriptural responsibility for the believer to tithe. And not only is this clear, but the Bible goes on to provide us a pattern for our giving.

One, believers are responsible to give proportionally. Obviously, we can't all give the same amount because there are five talent, two talent, and one talent people. However, God does expect us to give the same percentage, and that begins with the tithe, the 10%. Malachi 3:8 says, *“Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings.”* Leviticus 27:30 says, *“And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord's. It is holy to the Lord.”* The first 10% belongs to God! No loopholes! Anything less constitutes stealing from God.

Two, believers are responsible to give properly. Malachi 3:10 tells us to *“Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house...”* “My house” referred to the Temple or as it is sometimes quoted, “The Lord's House.” Today we would call this place the church. So God's plan is that the tithe be brought into the church and distributed from there as the Lord leads.

Three, believers are responsible to give perpetually. In other words, this principle doesn't stop and start on the basis of our income or need. People will say, “Lord, if I only had more I would give...” But the Lord knows better, doesn't He? If we won't give a small amount, the odds are we won't give when it calls for a larger amount. It reminds me of the story of the country preacher who visited a farmer one day and asked him, “If you had \$2,000 would you give \$1,000 of it the Lord?” The farmer said, “I would!” “Well,” the preacher continued, “if you owned two cows, would you give one of them to the Lord.” “Absolutely!” said the farmer.

The preacher pressed on, saying, “And if you had two pigs, would you give one of them to the Lord?” The farmer said, “Now wait a minute, that’s not fair. You know I have two pigs!”

I’ve done that, haven’t you? I’ve said, “Lord if I only had more, I’d...” But Luke 16:10 says, “*He who is faithful in what is least is faithful also in much; and he who is unjust in what is least is unjust also in much.*” According to Jesus the bottom line is this: If we aren’t giving sacrificially with what we have, we won’t give sacrificially if we have more because how much we “have” has nothing to do with it—it’s an attitude of the heart!

So what are we responsible for? Our firstfruits or what the Bible calls the tithe. And Romans 11:16 points something out that all of us need to remember. It says, “*For if the firstfruit is holy, the lump is also holy...*” That means that when we give the tithe to the Lord we are making a statement that everything else belongs to Him as well. But when we refuse, we are essentially telling the Lord that He has no right to anything that belongs to us; when ultimately, nothing belongs to us. Everything we have is on loan from God and we are held responsible to give what He tells us to give.

Tithing = Reward

What should our attitude be when we give? First, we should give thankfully! When we stop and consider all that God has done for us; when we stop and consider that Jesus Christ came to earth and gave His very life for us; when we stop and consider that He saved us and we are on our way to heaven... then we should give thankfully!

Secondly, we should give cheerfully! 2 Corinthians 9:7 tells us that God loves a cheerful giver. The word “cheerful” in the Greek here literally means “hilarious.” That tells us that God loves those who give with great joy; not merely because they have to. O.S. Hawkins, the pastor of First Baptist Church in Dallas, makes a very interesting statement. He says: “The principle hindrance to the advancement of the kingdom of God is greed. It is the chief obstacle to heaven-sent revival. It seems that when the back of greed is broken, the human spirit soars into regions of unselfishness. I believe that it is safe to say there can be no continuous revival without hilarious giving. And I fear no contradiction; wherever there is hilarious giving there will soon be revival!”

His comments reminded me of an article that was printed in the Houston Chronicle on Sunday, June 15, 2003. It was written by Connie Kang, who works for the Los Angeles Times newspaper. The title of the article was: “Few Among Faithful Heed Call to Tithe.” In it, she said the Barna Research Group reported that only 9% of Christian evangelicals (defined as people who believe they have a personal responsibility to share their religious beliefs about Jesus with non-Christians) tithed in 2001. And then, in contrast to this group, she wrote about the 7,000-member Young Nak Presbyterian Church, a Korean congregation in downtown Los Angeles, where over 70% of the congregation tithes. I have since discovered that it is commonplace for evangelical Korean Christians to tithe. With that being said, is it any wonder that the greatest revival in any nation that has taken place on planet earth in the past forty years is not in America, not in Europe; but in South Korea? A huge percentage of its population is now born-again believers and South Korea is the home of the largest church in the world, the Yoido Full Gospel Church, with more than 750,000 members! And now they are sending missionaries to America, instead of the other way. So I believe that Hawkins was right when he said, “...wherever there is hilarious giving there will soon be revival.”

Thirdly, we should give liberally. 2 Corinthians 9:6 says, “*He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, but he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*” If we are stingy in our sowing, we will be sadly disappointed with our reaping. The measure we pour out will be the measure we get back. If we give liberally, we receive liberally as well. Someone summed it up this way: “When I tithe, I shovel into His bin and then He shovels into mine. But God has a bigger shovel!”

Fourthly, we should give sacrificially. It is one thing to give out of abundance, but when we give out of “need” that’s when we really get the Lord’s attention. That’s why Jesus was so impressed with the widow that gave her two mites—she gave out of need, when others gave out of their abundance.

And lastly, we should give expectantly. I’m convinced that God wants us to abound and flourish. He wants us to be as successful as we can be. He wants us to be blessed! But God’s blessings are always tied to spiritual principles and spiritual precepts. God says, “...*try Me now in this.*” He says that as we follow this mandate to tithe, He will open the windows of heaven and pour out such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it; and He will rebuke the devourer for your sake. Quite a reward, isn’t it? Luke 6:38 says, “*Give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom...*” Now do we have the faith to believe what God’s Word says? It really comes down to that, doesn’t it? Can we trust God to keep His word? That’s why tithing isn’t a financial issue, it’s a spiritual issue. It’s a matter of trust, a matter of faith, and a matter of the heart.

As believers, we’ve been called to change our world. But we will never change the world if we are chained to it! Does tithing involve risk-taking? Sure it does, but anything worthwhile in life requires some risk. Does tithing involve responsibility? I believe that it does. I believe the Bible clearly states, both New and Old Testament, that this is God’s financial plan for His Church. And does tithing involve a reward? Absolutely, both here on planet earth, and better yet, in a place called heaven. As Martin Luther said, “I have tried to keep things in my hands and lost them all, but what I have given into God’s hands, I still possess.” His words remind me of the story about a man that died and went to heaven, and there he discovered the truth about money. He said, “What I spent, I lost; what I saved, I left; and what I gave, I have.” So the bottom line is this: We never lose what we give away, we just send it on before us to a place called heaven and there it becomes our treasure.