

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE T WORD

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Texts: Proverbs 3:5-10, Malachi 3:7b-12, 1Corinthians 16:1-2, 2Corinthians 9:6-12

When we don't want to name something, sometimes we use the first letter to get the word across, right? I could give you a couple of examples but even that might be risky in the pulpit. This morning, let's talk about the T word. It's a word you don't often hear *happily* spoken or preached about in the church. It's a word that some of us who grew up in the church were hit over the head with, which we came to associate with guilt. I wonder how many of you can guess what the "T word" is. That's right: Tithing!

Well, this morning, I'm going go where fools dare to tread. I want to get this word out on the table and talk about it, for two important reasons: First, because it is a very Biblical concept. And second, because the Bible portrays tithing not as a guilt thing but as an adventure: the adventure of trusting God and seeing God do miraculous things.

Let's start with a definition. Tithing is a practice as old as history, of giving the first tenth of ones produce, ones increase, ones income, to the Lord's work.

You see it throughout the Bible.

When Abraham returned from defeating the kings who had taken Lot his nephew hostage, Abraham offered a tenth of the booty to the mysterious Melchizedek, priest of the most high God.¹

When Jacob woke from his dream of the heavenly ladder and heard God promise to take care of him wherever he went, Jacob pledged in his gratitude: "Of all that Thou dost give me will surely return a tenth to Thee."² He did. And everything Jacob did from then on, prospered.

"A tithe of everything belongs to the Lord; and to the Lord is to be set apart," says the Law of Moses³

"You shall bring forth all the tithes of your produce ... that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do."

Did you happen to notice the promise attached to the command of that verse? "You shall bring forth all the tithes" That is the *command*. "...that the Lord may bless you in all the work of your hands." That is the *promise*. Look and you will find this same bond of command and promise in all of Scripture.

"Honor the Lord with the first fruits of all your produce," said the writer of Proverbs, "then your barns will be filled with plenty"⁴

"Cast your bread upon the waters," said the preacher, "for you will find it after many days."⁵

"Bring the full tithes into the storehouse ... and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."⁶

¹ Genesis 14:17-20

² Genesis 28:10-22

³ Leviticus 27:30

⁴ Proverbs 3:9-10

⁵ Ecclesiastes 11:2

⁶ Malachi 3:10

“Give and it shall be given to you,” declared Jesus. “Good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over will be poured into your lap.”⁷

The same twofold formula of *command* and *promise* runs strong through all these verses. God *commands* God’s people to be generous with their blessings in the support of God’s work and God’s people. And God *promises* to specially bless those who do. We’ll return to this concept a little later.

In the Old Testament, tithing was the law! In the New Testament, however, you no longer find the law of ten percent. Instead you find the principle of *joyous* giving. Jesus does not once command tithing to his disciples. But he does say, “Freely you have received. Freely give.” Paul, in all his admonishment about stewardship, never mentions 10%. Instead, he says, “Let each person give as he has determined in his own heart to give, for God loves a cheerful—literally, a riotous—giver.”

The New Testament doesn’t do away with giving. It changes the *motivation* for giving from the requirement of duty to the impulse of love, from the demands of law to the response of gratitude for all Christ has done for us. “Freely you have received, freely give.”

Still, there are principles of godly giving that are deeply imbedded in the ancient concept of tithing and which we will do well to pay attention to.

Here’s the first such principle:

The principle of PROPORTIONALITY.

In Old Testament times, the people were to give the first tenth. In the New Testament, Paul similarly teaches his listeners to set aside a *proportion* of their income for the Lord’s work **at the beginning of every week**—whatever they determined in their hearts to give.⁸ Do you see the principle in both injunctions? The principle of proportion is that you decide *in advance* what percentage of your income you will set apart right from the top. Why? Because if we do not decide *in advance* what we intend to give, the chances are that we will end up giving little at all.

What is the foremost financial ambition of just about all of us in America? I think I know. *It is to make as much money as we are spending.* And the spending always seems to run ahead of the earning! So if we give to the Lord’s work whatever is *left over* after we’ve hammered away at our expenditures and debts, what do we have left to give the Lord? That’s why the Bible enjoins us to decide *beforehand* what percentage of our income we will give upfront; at the beginning rather than the end of each month or week or pay period. Otherwise, you’ll never have enough *left over* for God’s work.

And that’s why we take this time (called stewardship season) before the turn of every year to decide beforehand what proportion of our income we will dedicate to the Lord’s work in the coming year. It is an act of worship, of dedicating our best to God.

Proportionality. The second principle follows right on its heels:

The principle of PRIORITY.

It was the *first* fruits, the *first* born, the *first and best* that the Old Testament law enjoined. It was at the *first* of the week that Paul instructed that each set aside what he or she was to give. “Seek ye *first* the kingdom of God,” said Jesus. See the principle there?

This principle of *giving first* runs totally against the grain of our culture, whose first principle is not give, but to get. How utterly opposed are the values of the kingdom

⁷ Luke 6:38

⁸ 1Corinthians 16:1-2

of God and the spirit of this world's global economy. Which do we choose? That is the issue we must pause to reflect on! "You cannot serve one and the other at the same time," said Jesus.

I assume it is our desire to put God first in our lives. And how do we do it? By putting God first in our financial priorities:

The first fruits, not the leftovers.

The substance, not the scraps.

A tithe, not a tip.

"Then," says God, "your barns will be filled with plenty and your vats bursting with new wine." That's *God's* promise! Which leads right on to the next principle of Biblical giving:

The principle of PRACTICAL FAITH.

Listen: Faith is not what you are willing to **believe**; it is what you are prepared to **do** in response to what you believe. Faith is not your intellectual nod to theological formulas and creeds. Faith is what you are willing to risk for the love of God because you believe in the promise of God.

"Test me in this!" says the Lord. "Go ahead, make my day! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, take a chance on me with your finances, put me first in your priorities before all your other obligations and see if I will not throw open the windows of heaven and pour you out a blessing!"

Do we believe in that promise? Do we really? Then take the challenge. Put God's promise to the test for *one year* and see if, at the end of that year, God has not cared for your financial needs. Maybe you haven't got enough faith to start with ten percent. Very well, then start with three or four or five. When you see that God has been faithful to that step of faith, then step out to trust God with more. If you are already at 3%, trust God for four! If you are already at 5%, trust God for six.

That's the step of faith: not what we are willing to believe in our heads about God's goodness, but what we are ready to step out to do in reliance upon God's goodness. Now here's another important Biblical principle of giving:

The principle of God's rebounding PROVISION.

In the Old Testament, the tithes of the people went largely to the maintenance of temple worship, to the Levites who served it, and to the widow and orphan of the community. Today for us, the church takes the place of the temple; no longer a building stone and mortar but a community of people. The church is where God's word is proclaimed. The church is where you come to baptize your children, to celebrate your life's landmarks, to get prayer and encouragement and support when you are hurt or troubled. The church is where you come to be blessed by the worship, teaching, music, and fellowship of its gathering. The church is the organ through which we serve the needs of the sick, the lost and the lonely.

Let's talk turkey: It takes money to operate these ministries of the church that we and our children and community and world rely on. When we invest in these ministries, guess what! That investment comes *right back to us*. And when we shortchange our own church for all our other financial priorities, we only end up shortchanging ourselves.

Jesus put it this way: "With the measure you use, it will be measured back to you again." That's the principle of *rebounding provision*. "Give and it will be given back to you."

Years ago, an extremely wealthy real estate developer appointed one of his nephews in a distant city, a struggling contractor, to build him a house near the contractor's own city. The old man entrusted his nephew contractor with all the arrangements and made sure he was lavishly provided with all the funds needed for the best building materials. But the clever nephew smelled an opportunity: he cut corners and ordered cheap materials wherever he could, hiding them in the structure while he pocketed the difference. When the house was finished, the rich uncle flew into town to look it over. The nephew was stunned when the old man said: "Bill, this house is for you—a gift for your family."

Get the picture? To the degree that we bless God's house, truly, we bless ourselves; and to the degree that we withhold our blessing we diminish ourselves. Because the house we build for God is the house we ourselves inhabit.

In this coming week as you pray and think how you will support your church's work in 2010, and as we return here next Sunday to offer our pledges together, I urge you to think on these four Biblical Principles.

1. Think **proportion**. Decide in advance what proportion, what percentage, of your income you will give throughout the year.
2. Think **priority**. Put God's work first in your financial planning, right up there with your mortgage and club dues and car payment.
3. Think **practical faith**. "Go ahead," says God. "Put me to the test and see if I do not open the windows of heaven and pour you out such a blessing that you have not room to receive it."
4. Think **rebounding provision**. "One person gives freely, yet grows all the richer," says the Proverbs. "Another withholds what he should, and only suffers want."⁹

⁹ Proverbs 11:24,25)