

“What about tithing?”

Preached By: Rev. Karla Wubbenhorst on June 1, 2008

Scripture Readings:

Genesis 14: 17-20

¹⁷ After Abram returned from defeating Kedorlaomer and the kings allied with him, the king of Sodom came out to meet him in the Valley of Shaveh (that is, the King's Valley). ¹⁸ Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, ¹⁹ and he blessed Abram, saying, "Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. ²⁰ And blessed be God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand." Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Malachi 3: 7-12

⁷ Ever 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?" ⁸ Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, "How are we robbing you?" In your tithes and offerings! ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰ Bring 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. ¹¹ I 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. ¹² Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

Luke 11: 42

"Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone.

Luke 19: 1-9

¹ Jesus entered Jericho and was passing through. ² A man was there by the name of Zacchaeus; he was a chief tax collector and was wealthy. ³ He wanted to see who Jesus was, but being a short man he could not, because of the crowd. ⁴ So he ran ahead and climbed a sycamore-fig tree

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to see him, since Jesus was coming that way. ⁵When Jesus reached the spot, he looked up and said to him, "Zacchaeus, come down immediately. I must stay at your house today." ⁶So he came down at once and welcomed him gladly. ⁷All the people saw this and began to mutter, "He has gone to be the guest of a 'sinner.'" ⁸But Zacchaeus stood up and said to the Lord, "Look, Lord! Here and now I give half of my possessions to the poor, and if I have cheated anybody out of anything, I will pay back four times the amount." ⁹Jesus said to him, "Today salvation has come to this house, because this man, too, is a son of Abraham. ¹⁰For the Son of Man came to seek and to save what was lost."

Sermon Text:

Last week I invited you to request a sermon to be preached over these summer months on an issue or a question you have regarding what the church teaches. When the time of his departure was approaching, Jesus told his disciples that he would not burden them with a lot of detailed instructions and explanations. Instead he would give them the Holy Spirit as their “Guide into all Truth.” That means that there is truth to find, on every issue that confronts us in life, and that Christ means his people to be distinguished not only by the renewal of their hearts, but also by the renewing of their minds (Romans 12.2). Well, there have been a number of fascinating topics suggested and it’s clear that I’ve got my work cut out for me if I’m to say anything at all satisfying about any of them. However, there’s still room, so if anyone would like to request a topic and has not yet let me know, please do so before next Sunday.

Today’s topic came out of a request from the stewardship and finance committee for me to preach a couple of sermons on money. The particular question of tithing is also something that arises from time to time in my discussions with new members: “Does Westminster-St. Paul’s expect its members to tithe?” Certainly some churches are very clear on the point. There is a certain church here in Guelph, for instance, which is happy to have you in their service of worship at any level of giving, but if you take the

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step into membership with them, giving ten percent of your income is part of what's expected. This is not, for them, just an ingenious way of solving the cash flow problem; it arises out of their deeply held conviction that a tenth, or a tithe (which simply means a tenth), is THE proportion set out in the Bible, telling the Lord's people what they ought to give. It is THE benchmark of financial faithfulness, which is an essential part of Christian discipleship and the part most often neglected.

The short answer which I give to new members here, if I'm asked “Does Westminster-St. Paul's expect its members to tithe?” is that our vows for those making profession of their faith say this: “God is glorified when He receives our regular worship on the Lord's day in a congregation of his people, *with a fitting proportion of our time, talents and money*. God is glorified when his Word, known by the regular study of scripture, becomes our rule of life. God is glorified when, in our daily work we serve him and in our daily speech, we profess our loyalty to Jesus Christ. *Do you promise to grow in the exercise of these holy disciplines?*” So our members are asked for “a fitting proportion,” not only of money, but also of time and talents, and what they actually promise is not even that they are there yet, but that they *will grow* in the exercise of giving, as one of the holy disciplines. That's the short answer. This morning I'm going to give you the longer answer.

If you do some reading on the question of tithing in contemporary Christian circles, you will soon discover that the issue is hotly debated. Some say that the tithe is a biblical requirement made of the Lord's people in all times and places. Others say that it is an outdated Old Testament concept, a requirement under the law of Moses, but by no means binding upon Christians. How do Christians, looking at the same scriptures, come up with such widely differing views?

This is the history of the tithe: Abram, having been given an unlikely victory against the king of Elam by the grace of God, and laden down with all the spoils of war, is met by Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the Most High God. Abram gives

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Melchizedek a 10th of everything (Genesis 14. 20) and by that spontaneous act of whatever you like to call it -- thanksgiving, piety, recognition of God’s abundant grace -- Abram inaugurates the practice of tithing.

Apparently it is a practice he teaches to his descendents because later in Genesis his grandson Jacob also vows to the Lord: “Of all that you give me, I will give you a tenth” (Genesis 28.22). That was in the days of the patriarchs when the giving the tithe was spontaneous. Later it becomes an obligation under the law of Moses: In Numbers 18 and Leviticus 27 you can read how the Levites, one of the tribes of Israel, whose job was to maintain the worship of the Lord, were to be given one tenth of everything owned by the other 11 tribes, so that they could live. In turn they were also to give a tithe to the high priest for the maintenance of worship. In those chapters the point is made that the Lord’s portion is to be the best portion, or at least a portion chosen indiscriminately from the whole of our income (Numbers 18: 29; Leviticus 27: 33). A story is told of a woman who had had a turkey in her deep freeze for 5 years. She was worried about whether the meat would still be good so she phoned the people at Butterball and asked, “Can I still eat this turkey after 5 years in the freezer?” They said she could – it wouldn’t hurt her -- but they would make no guarantee as to the quality. “Oh well then,” she said, “I guess I can always give it to the church.” This is exactly the attitude that the Old Testament law was meant to forbid -- an approach where we only offer to God the left-overs, the parts that we have no use for ourselves.

Deuteronomy 26 speaks of a festival of first-fruits and a year of the tithe. The first-fruits festival took place at harvest time, and involved bringing a basket full of the first produce harvested to priest, who would present it at the altar of the Lord. It was a time of joy and thanksgiving for all that the Lord had provided. The year of the tithe happened every third year and this tithe was given not only to the Levite, but also to the alien, the widow and the fatherless. Thus the tithe became not only a way of returning

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thanks to God and providing for his worship, but also something of a social welfare system.

Under the law, tithing was *an obligation to be duly paid* rather than *an offering freely given*, but the book of Malachi tells us it wasn't always duly paid either! The people of Israel looked for loopholes to get around paying the full tithe because they begrudged it. “You are robbing me in your tithes and offerings” says the Lord through the prophet: “Bring 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” (Malachi 3: 9-10). This text has been used in some unfortunate ways by preachers who want to charge their congregations with “robbing God” if they don't write out their cheque to the church for 10%, and by those who preach the prosperity gospel. Although here in Malachi God complains of being robbed, in the Psalms (Ps 50: 8-15) and in Micah (Mic. 6: 6-8) he reminds his people that there is nothing they can give him that is not already his. God is not being robbed of *money* when we give grudgingly and sparingly, but he is being robbed of the *worship* that he is due as the giver of all. So is a person who with a glad and generous heart gives 7% to their congregation and 7% to other ministries and charities robbing God? I don't think so!

And that challenge which God gives to his people: “bring the full tithe...[and then] see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down...an overflowing blessing,” means not somehow that we broker a deal with God when we tithe: “See I bring you my tenth, now you had better reward me with health and wealth.” No, God is saying, “you begrudge the tithe because you lack faith in my power to provide for you. Test it and see. See if you can outgive me. Tithe and see if you will ever have cause to complain of shortage at the end of the month. The more you give, the more financial miracles you'll witness and the more your faith will grow.”

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So that is the history of the tithe as we inherit it from the Old Testament, but what Christians should do, surely hinges on the New. One text that often gets brought up in the tithing debate is this one from Luke 11.42. Jesus criticizes the Pharisees for tithing mint and rue but neglecting justice and the love of God. “You should have practiced the latter” he says “without leaving the former undone.” If any of you have mint growing in your garden you will know just how easy it would be for you to give a tenth of it away! I put a little mint in two years ago and I’m just about begging my neighbours now: take a tenth, take 20%, take half, take 90%, because I know that by next summer I’ll have just as much again. This is what the Pharisees were doing: they were fulfilling the easy parts of the law and laying great emphasis on those parts - - tithing their mint and rue and saying: “look what holy men are we,” without having a care at all for the *love of God* (which lay behind the tithe to the Levites, so that God’s worship might be maintained), or *justice to the neighbour* (which lay behind the year of the tithe and provided for widows, orphans and resident aliens). In the sentence “you should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone” Jesus sums up his whole attitude toward the law. Christ says he comes “not to abolish the law but to fulfill it” (Matthew 5.17). If anything, he sets the bar higher than the law for those who would be his followers. In Matthew 5 the Sermon on the Mount, he says “Moses said do not commit adultery, but I say to you whoever looks at a woman with lust in his heart has committed adultery already” (Matthew 5.27-28). And every time Jesus comments on the Old Testament teaching it is like this – always to make it harder, never easier. “Unless your righteousness exceeds that of the Pharisees and teachers of the law” Jesus says to his followers “you shall not enter the kingdom of heaven” (Matthew 5: 20).

So I sometimes hear Christians making the point that they are free from the obligation to tithe because they are under the new covenant, and I want to say, “don’t be counting your savings too soon,” because freedom from the tithe may well mean freedom to

adjust it upwards from 10%; I'm not sure the New Testament gives us any grounds for adjusting it downwards. And doesn't even the desire to do that – to find the loophole that lets us get away with giving less -- smack a little of phariseeism? Often one hears the point, and it's quite right too, that the social welfare system funded by the tithe in ancient Israel is now funded by the government and we pay for it through our taxes. But as soon as we begin to look for reasons why a modern tithe should only be 3% or 5%, have we not already begun to do what the Pharisees were doing? Looking for loopholes and bargains in the worship of God – so that we can justify giving God so much, but no more. Have we not already lost the new covenant feel, where the tithe ought again to become what it was for Abraham, something glad and spontaneous and worshipful?

When we look carefully at what people give or are asked to give in the New Testament we see that 10% doesn't even begin to cover it. The widow gave *all that she had* (Mark 12. 44), the rich young ruler is asked to give away *everything* and finds that he can't (Mark 10. 21). And Zacchaeus, to whom Jesus says: “today salvation has come to this house” gives 50% and promises 400% restitution to anyone he has cheated (Luke 19: 8-9). In the book of Acts the early Christians lay *all* their wealth at the feet of the apostles, so that they might distribute it fairly and none may have need (Acts 4: 32-36).

When I was reading over again the familiar story of Zacchaeus in preparation for this sermon, I discovered something I had never noticed before. It's because I had never read the story in the context of tithing. At the end, in verse 9, Jesus says: "Today salvation has come to this house, *because this man, too, is a son of Abraham.*" I am now sure that Jesus calls Zacchaeus “a son of Abraham” not because he is a Jew, but because his response to grace is, like Abram's initial tithe, a spontaneous, worshipful act of giving. Abram says with his 10%: “Lord I recognise that this victory I have just won is not down to me and my pitifully small army of 318 men. It is down to you. You deal with me so

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generously, so graciously always. I want to respond by loving you, and not in words only, but by pledging to you some of my substance.” Zacchaeus says with his 50% something very similar: “Jesus, what grace you have shown me. Out of all the righteous people, the good people, with whom you could have dined tonight, you came to *my* house. I want to respond by loving you, and not in words only, but by pledging to you some of my substance.” Do you see? That is the spirit of the tithe, and that is what God looks for. He looks for the sincerity of the response, not for a number. Maybe it’s 10, maybe it’s 50, maybe we’re still on the way, but some response to God’s amazing grace is definitely awaited.

Some of you right now are probably finding this sermon suspect because of its timing. It comes on a Sunday when stewardship and finance has announced a deficit of over \$10 000.00 to the end of April. And that comes as we’re running a campaign to raise a gift for Habitat – a gift intended as something celebratory, a glad response to the 50 years of grace God has shown to us. And that comes as we are trying to keep on target with our commitment to Presbyterians Sharing. There is a need at present and it will not be met if you take money from the operating side to pay for your gift to Habitat, or from Presbyterians Sharing to pay for the general budget – that isn’t really giving, it’s only shuffling. There is a need at present...however, the kind of giving that we see in Abraham and that we see in Zacchaeus is *not need-driven*, it is motivated by a desire *to respond* -- with gratitude, faith and with generosity – once we recognize God’s overwhelming grace. And God *has* given us so much! We don’t need to win the 6/49 before we can *start* responding, God has placed all the resources we need already in the hands of this congregation. Let me illustrate:

At one church the local treasurer resigned after many years of having to pay bills with not enough money. It was hard to find a replacement, but eventually one member, who was also the manager of the local grain elevator agreed to take it on – on two conditions: that no treasurer’s report would be given for the first

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year, and that no questions be asked about finances during that year. The congregation was surprised, but in the end they agreed, as most of them did business with this man themselves, and found him very honest and trustworthy. At the end of the year the new treasurer gave his report: the church indebtedness of \$228 000 has been paid. The minister's stipend has been increased by 8%, the Presbyterians sharing allocation has be paid 200%, and there is a cash balance of \$11 252.00 with no outstanding bills. The congregation was all agog: “How did you do it?” they asked, “Where did the money come from?” The man answered quietly, “Most of you bring your grain to my elevator. Throughout the year I simply withheld ten percent on your behalf and gave it to the church in your name. You didn't even miss it!”

Now what that treasurer did was violate the principle of voluntary giving by donating his customers' money on their behalf without their knowledge, but he did it to make a point – that if all of us tithed, in fact if even half of us tithed, there would never have to be another discussion about money in this church ever again!

Have a look at the back of the stewardship and finance notice – the one on the red paper in the bulletin. There is a percentage giving calculator on which you can see, based on your weekly or yearly income, what a tithe would be, and also what a 2% gift or a 5% gift or a 12% gift or a 15% gift would be. I want you to understand: *I am not telling everyone to give 10% or more, I am challenging everyone, in the name of what I think is biblical teaching, to respond in faith to a level that challenges you compared to where you are now.* I could not stand here and say that to you, if I did not also apply the challenge to myself. Back in the early 90s, when I was in my first degree, I encountered some Christians who caused me to think seriously about how much I was giving to the church. I think at the time I was putting in \$5 which was less than the cost of a movie, even back then, and considerably less than I would spend during the week on coffee – the university campus' most popular legal drug. Yet it was more than I was giving voluntarily to anything else – because at that point I *wasn't*

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giving voluntarily to anything else. Students tend to think that they deserve a break – that people should give to them, because they are in a position, not unlike seniors on fixed income, where they have a lot of bills coming in – for housing, for tuition, for books – and no way to offset them by working, since they’re engaged in full time study. So it was in those years that I took the tithe as my goal, and it took me some years to reach it, but I can give anecdotal testimony to what so many Christians have discovered as they have stepped out in faith to increase their givings – that truly, as the grain elevator man said, “you never miss it.”

Are you afraid to risk that much of your security? Would it be a holy discipline and an exercise of faith if didn’t feel risky? Yet taking a chance on God is the closest we will ever find to a secure investment: “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.”

Now unto him who poured himself out without reserve, without measure, for our salvation, be all honour and glory and praise, all wealth, and power and might, both now and forever (viz. II Cor. 8: 9 and Revelation 5:12).