

Sermon Notes for 11/20/16 (Christ the King Sunday, Stewardship #2)

Preached at Jehovah Lutheran – St. Paul, MN

Text: Malachi 3:1-18

Theme: WORSHIPING THE KING WITH JOYFUL GIFTS

Hymn: LBW 172 (Lord, Enthroned in Heavenly Splendor)

The Point: The child of God demonstrates joy and freedom in the use of all of life's resources, especially those resources dealing with our financial well-being.

Introduction: Some people get irritated when the pastor preaches about money. That is interesting, since Jesus had a lot to say about money. Some have studied this and have said that more than one-third of Jesus' teaching is about our use of money. In the gospel of Luke alone, there are some 40 passages (representing over 200 verses) where Jesus is teaching about how we use our material goods and our money. And that is just one of the four gospels. Now there may be good reason why some people are irritated by the sermons that address the use of money. Sometimes pastors try to beat congregations into submission with guilt. Or they try to motivate people by use of the law. But more often it is true that Satan simply loves to use our personal feelings and attitudes to refuse any teaching that hits at our pocketbook.

The prophet Malachi declared some pretty severe condemnation to the nation of Israel, even hitting at the pocketbook. His is the last book of the Old Testament, and even his prediction about the coming of the Lord in the person of the "messenger of the covenant" is harsh and sharp. He asks, "Who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years."

A refining process was needed for God's people to bring pure and acceptable offerings. Offerings to God are to be brought in righteousness, with hearts that are cleansed by His forgiveness and that desire to please Him with all of life and its resources. Some were no doubt bringing their tithes and offerings with a sour spirit and a resentful heart, like Cain. Remember that Abel's offerings were accepted by God, while Cain's were rejected by the Lord. Only a heart that leans on God's promises can bring acceptable offerings.

When you go to a doctor for your annual check-up, he or she will often begin to poke, prod, and press various places, all the while asking, "Does this hurt? How about this?" If you cry out in pain, one of two things has happened. Either the doctor has pushed too hard, without the right sensitivity. Or, more likely, there's something wrong, and the doctor will say, "We'd better do some more tests. It's not supposed to hurt there!" So it is when pastors preach on financial responsibility, and certain members cry out in discomfort, criticizing the message and the messenger. Sometimes the pastor has pushed too hard without sufficient sympathy or sensitivity. Or it may be that there's something wrong. In that case, I say, "My friend, we're in need of the Great Physician because it's not supposed to hurt there." (Ben Rogers)

When we think about our Christian stewardship, we need to get to the heart of the matter, not just satisfy ourselves by thinking about amounts and percentages. (Oh, we will get around to that, certainly. But first we need to test to see that our hearts are right with our God.) Have we been refined? Has God's judgment brought us to our knees? Will we admit that our sins have created a chasm between Him and us? And will we see at Calvary the price that our sin demanded? For there the very Lamb of God bore the pains and punishments of a whole world of selfish, ungrateful, self-centered sinners so that we could be refined and purified to serve God with joy and freedom. We who live on this side of Jesus' death and resurrection have seen a world of God's love and mercy that Malachi's hearers could only hope for and pray for.

One area that the Israelites were offending God was in their offerings. Malachi's words burn the air: "Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! 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." God was not happy with their indifference to their giving, their unfaithful stewardship of life and all of its resources. Their hearts needed to be purified and renewed.

Our hearts also need to be renewed. They too often rebel against God's demands and His will. Our hearts have clung to "our stuff" and "our things" as if they were really our own, forgetting that all things belong first and foremost to God Himself. We have held our fists tightly closed when God was seeking to pry them open to serve as a blessing to our neighbors. We have assumed that God was ordering all things to keep us happy and secure, when His desire is to use us in good times and bad times to bear witness to the world around us of His empowering and embracing love. So we need renewal, beginning with repentance, recognizing that we are not the center of the universe. And by God's grace, we can then receive the freeing love that Christ died to give to us and to all.

We are only 12 days past a very difficult and divisive election in our land. And as we, the people of God, struggle to make sense of what has happened, we find ourselves conflicted and divided still. One Christian author who agonizes with us has written these words: "I look at you, you look at me, and what we get to see in each other is a person God voted for when he raised Jesus from the dead. This will be, at first blush, an embarrassing idea. I bumble, stumble, and grope my way as badly as anyone. So do you. I think thoughts and make the kind of choices that leave you speechless. You do it in turn. You will not appear to me at times to be the kind of person a righteous God could get behind. You'll want to mutter similar thoughts about me when cornered with your friends. Yet here is Christ for both of us." Here is Christ for both of us, the One in whom God has (yes, we use that word here, too) ELECTED us to spend eternity with Him and with one another. That is the beginning point for our stewardship.

Unfortunately, many people (including many within the church) have not really struggled with this matter of being stewards of life and all of life's resources for God's purposes. One man has said that the trouble is that too many people are spending money they haven't yet earned for things they don't need to impress people they don't like. How true is that for you and me? What are the purposes that are guiding our use of the resources that our Lord has generously put into our hands? This is the question that we ought to struggle with each day? And when those purposes seem to revolve only around our own little pet projects and desires, then we need to repent and to seek God's renewing power to live new lives.

While we may discuss stewardship under general themes ("managing all of life and life's resources"), we do eventually in our personal lives need to get around to the question of what goes into the offering plate (or offering bag) on Sunday morning. Here we do not have a clear and unambiguous scriptural requirement given to the children of God. We are not Old Testament Israel, to whom God gave a clear command concerning the tithe. Each person or family was required under the law to bring 10% of their income to the temple for the support of the priests and to provide for the worship life of the Israelites. Over and above that were the offerings, which were periodic and related to certain feasts, festivals, observances, or sacrifices. It is not unreasonable to suppose that such expectations raised the giving level for each family to the 15% level or better.

Now I do not know why God required the tithe of Israel. But there are some very good reasons why that level may resonate with people generally. First of all, 10% is easy to figure out (much easier than 8% or 13% or the like). If you have a ten-acre field, the yield off one acre would be the tithe. If your herd

produces ten calves, one of those belongs to the Lord. If you are making \$1000/week, it is simple to move the decimal one place over and figure your giving at \$100/week. Easy math, huh?

Secondly, 10% is a significant percentage of our income. Connie and I do a simple budgeting process where we have grouped our expenses into various categories such as savings, taxes, housing, transportation, food, etc. Maybe you do the same in your household planning. Of the 10 major categories of expense, there are only three besides our giving that range over the 10% figure. If we are taking our giving seriously, it would seem that it needs to range into the area of being statistically significant for us. If my giving simply involves seeing what little may be left in my wallet at the end (or beginning) of the week, that is hardly serious stewardship. Generous giving involves some serious planning.

Third, I think we sometimes forget that God never requires anything of His people that is not good for them. That goes also for the requirement of the tithe. Israel did not suffer because God required the tithe, though (as Malachi warned) the neglect of it would mean peril for them. Through such a generous level of giving, a synagogue could be built and funded wherever there were only 10 Jewish families present. We are no longer bound by that tithe requirement, but we are free in our financial planning to make decisions that honor our Lord and His kingdom. Would not the tithe be a healthy starting point? Or, if it seems like an impossible goal today, perhaps you would be wise to set a goal to reach that level of giving within three or five years by increasing your giving by a percent or two each year.

C.S. Lewis' words are quite accurate, I think. He said, "I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare." Giving more than we can spare – that is a challenging thought. If our giving never cramps our lifestyle, if our giving never reaches to the level of challenging us to keep growing in our stewardship, if our giving never means that we might have to postpone that next vacation or the purchase of the new car or some other bauble, are we really giving at a level of Christ-centered stewardship?

And this cannot start too early. Parents, you ought to be challenging your children (or perhaps grandparents can encourage their children in this direction) to learn generous giving early on. J.D. Rockefeller is reported to have said, "I never would have been able to tithe on the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, \$1.50 per week." (*A Guidebook for Pastors*, p. 154)

Conclusion: W.A. Criswell tells of an ambitious young man who told his pastor he'd promised God a tithe of his income. They prayed for God to bless his career. At that time he was making \$40.00 per week and tithing \$4.00. In a few years his income increased and he was tithing \$500.00 per week on his \$50,000 income. He called on the pastor to see if he could be released from his tithing promise, as it was too costly now. The pastor replied, "I don't see how you can be released from your promise, but we can ask God to reduce your income to \$40.00 a week, then you'd have no problem tithing \$4.00."

The child of God demonstrates joy and freedom in the use of all of life's resources, especially those resources dealing with our financial well-being. We do not do so because the church needs it – certainly not because God needs it. He owns all things. Our giving is one of those predictable signs that faith has taken deep root in our hearts. Our giving says we believe God is the ultimately generous Giver, having given His Son for us. Our giving says that we trust the Lord – and not our astute investment ability or our strength to earn – we trust the Lord to provide all that we need for this life and for the life to come. Our model is also our Savior Jesus, the One who gave all that He had to give, even His very life, for weak and miserable sinners that we might come to know truth and life in its fullest sense. To Him we give our honor and praise, in all our living, including our giving! AMEN!