



You're on your Honour 2

Malachi 3:6-12; 2 Cor 9:6-15

*I counted cash, while God counted crosses.
I counted gains, while He counted losses.
I counted my worth, my things gained in store,
And He sized me up by the scars that I bore.
I counted honors and sought degrees,
He counted the hours that I spent on my knees.
I never knew until one day by the grave,
How vain are the things we spend life to save.*

Plenty of people are willing to give God credit, yet few are willing to give Him cash.

This morning we explored two key passages on money and giving. I finished with a challenge: You are on your honour. How are we to honour God who paid so high a price on our behalf? God loves a hilarious giver! Someone who gets pleasure out of doing what God does - give. What is He calling us to give of the wealth He has graciously already given to us?

So, before God we need to look as to how much He wants us to give. This evening, I want to tie up some loose ends on these passages and explore in particular the issue of tithing.

The OT law broadly stipulated in the tithe that there should be a tenth of what people produced or received. It was the primary financial responsibility of the people of God to Him. To not give dishonoured God. Let me remind you of the words in Malachi 3 *"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse--the whole nation of you--because you are robbing me.* Temple taxes and tithes varied over the years, but the tithe was there to support the worship and the formal work of God in the temple and that invariably was people and buildings. The tithe could be things or money and put in the temple treasury. The first-born and the best for God was always stipulated, not the bad animals or cast-offs. By the time of Jesus it was money given into the temple treasury as many people lived in towns and were involved in trade and business.

So the tithe was to support the formal work of God through the temple and later also through synagogues. It was that formal tenth – although as we know the Jews watered that down over the years so by the time of Malachi, it was probably a thirty-sixth – hence the accusation of robbing God. Offerings were different. These were gifts of possessions and money above and beyond the tithe. They could be a whole range of things – thank offerings in the Temple, alms to the poor and the like. They were free-will offerings of any size. IN addition, there were a whole range of thank offering sacrifices in the days of the temple as laid down in the Torah (first 5 books).

In Christ, the law does not apply to us so we do not have the same obligation as the Jews. We are called to Christ, not Judaism. However, down the years the established Church used the tithe as a legal tool to support the church. The OT law was given as justification for it. The tithe was a tax collected from

farmers and peasants to support the church. Crops etc were collected in tithe barns and failure to pay resulted in peasants being told they would go to Hell! The medieval church got rich and fat on the cash they raked in. The system but perhaps not the sentiments transferred after the reformation to the Church of England.

Even when this church was founded 200 years ago, the tithe law still existed. Dissenters like Baptists refused to pay. It caused lots of problems and as a result, Baptists could not get buried in consecrated ground – which is why we have a burial ground here. They couldn't even call themselves a church. By the mid 19th century, the legal tithe to the C of E was abolished, because it was difficult to collect the tithe in moneyed urban societies where dissenting churches were extremely strong and where politicians were increasingly less-interested in being involved in the church. Of course one of the key ideas of Dissenters was that, in the Baptist churches, all finance would be raised by a free-will offering of its members not as an obligation. It's an important fact to know because in Baptist circles the whole concept of tithing has got a poor press over the years and this is a major reason why rather than Baptists adhering to a particular kind of theology, because actually Scripture is quite clear on the subject.

So what does Scripture teach? Well, as I said in the OT there was the tithe which people paid to support the formal work of God – the Temple, the priesthood, the Levites and later the synagogues. Then on top were offerings to good causes. In the New Testament, there is no legal obligation and the word "tithe" is never used in the context of the church – Jesus only uses it in the context of Jews. But what is clear is that the tithe principle of supporting those called to full time service is very much there: *1 Cor 9:1 Am I not free? Am I not an apostle? Have I not seen Jesus our Lord? Are you not the result of my work in the Lord? 2 Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you! For you are the seal of my apostleship in the Lord. 3 This is my defence to those who sit in judgement on me. 4 Don't we have the right to food and drink? 5 Don't we have the right to take a believing wife along with us, as do the other apostles and the Lord's brothers and Cephas? 6 Or is it only I and Barnabas who must work for a living? 7 Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard and does not eat of its grapes? Who tends a flock and does not drink of the milk? 8 Do I say this merely from a human point of view? Doesn't the Law say the same thing? 9 For it is written in the Law of Moses: "Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain." Is it about oxen that God is concerned? 10 Surely he says this for us, doesn't he? Yes, this was written for us, because when the ploughman ploughs and the thresher threshes, they ought to do so in the hope of sharing in the harvest.*

What irritated Paul was the way in which he was not regarded as a proper apostle because he and Barnabas funded themselves through tent making. What is clear from the passage is that Peter and the other apostles didn't – they were supported by the church wherever they ministers – a practice well-established in Jewish society. And Paul says – quite right too and he and Barnabas were entitled to the same except they felt it more appropriate in their case not to claim that right. He uses a scripture from Deuteronomy 25:4 *"Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain."* Strange thing to say you may think. The idea is this – if you want your ox to tread your grain well, you need to allow him to feed rather than muzzle him which means he won't. In Christian circles down the ages, the principle has been that if we appoint someone to service, then we ensure that they have the wherewithal to live so they don't have to find work so they can dedicate themselves to the service of the church. This has been true for ministers, missionaries and other workers in the church for 2000 years – and that includes in Baptist circles too. So therefore, supporting the ministry of the church is the responsibility of the church. There's a good reason – because it helps facilitate the worship of the church. Therefore our giving is an act of worship in itself which helps us to continue to be a worshipping community. And it's scriptural.

What may vary is the way in which it's collected. In Britain, although there is no tithe law and the majority of mainline denominations collect in through freewill offerings. It's recognised in 2 Corinthians 9 as I did this morning that we are under grace and grace should make us more generous even than a tithe. But it does not get us away from the fact that we have a scriptural obligation to support those we set apart for ministry to support their needs and the tithe is one of the best practical solutions to guide people in their giving. It's scriptural, it works, but it's good guidance - feel free to give more because it isn't law. Likewise the use of tithing as regular giving is also practical because like Paul encouraged the Corinthians (1 Cor 16), it's collected regularly – good for cash flow.

Paul opted for a different course – a tent making minister – and that has been around for 2000 years too and we have that in Baptist circles as well. Never underestimate bi vocational ministry or devalue it. They devalued the apostle Paul because of it. The apostle Paul – can you believe it!! Most churches run on people with jobs serving. Let's celebrate them and not make them inferior to those we have set aside for service who we support financially and in other ways to do the work of God – be that the ministry, missionaries or parish nurses. It's scriptural to do so. Both existed in Paul's world and both in ours.

Supporting those who minister isn't the only thing church fellowships have given money for over the years. In Antioch (Acts 11) Paul and Barnabas encouraged the church to give to the church in Jerusalem for famine relief. Christians have always been at the forefront of giving towards the poor and hungry. The subject of poverty and justice are strong in scripture – but has been so watered down in modern society as the church surrendered it's role to the politicians. That's one area in which we again need to seize an initiative – but that for another time.

We know from Paul's activities, that churches made regular collections to benefit the poor and collected on the first day of the week (1 Cor 16:1). No only did churches meet their obligations to full-time workers, but they gave generously to the poor. We read three times of how churches supported the poor and famine relief in Judea.

1 Cor 16:1 Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do. 2 On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.

Why do you think we take collections on Sunday? As with OT practice, the churches gave to the poor above their obligation to their own full-time workers and the costs of their local ministry, not as an alternative to it. That should be our pattern too and is consistent with the teaching of scripture. If we are part of this church, we have an obligation to support the ministry and to support other churches. It's not an either or thing. It's both. however good the other causes, we have obligations too as members:

An old country preacher was earnestly exhorting his congregation to give more liberally. He was interrupted by a deacon who said, "Parson, you told us salvation is free - as free as the air we breathe and the water in the river. If that's true, why are you always asking us for money?" The elderly preacher solemnly replied, "Brother Jones, you're right. Salvation is free - as free as the water you drink. But if you want that water in the kitchen, somebody has to pay for the pump!"

Sadly, people often play church politics with their giving. I believe we should pray and then give, using the clear guidelines of scripture. Our giving should generous and grace-ful, motivated by love, not by using financial muscle to manipulate things how we want them but maybe not how God wants them. I have heard of numerous stories of churches down the years being hijacked by rich benefactors.

One observation I have made out of living on this earth a little while is that some of the most generous givers I have ever met have been some of the poorest people financially I have ever met. Yet they are rich in ways you couldn't even imagine. In fact secular studies have shown that the higher people's income is, the less of a proportion of their income goes to charitable sources. A study in the USA a few years ago found something like this:

Annual Income % of income to charity

0—10,000	5.5%
10,000—19,000	3.2%
20,000—29,000	2.9%
30,000—39,000	2.6%
40,000—49,000	1.8%

It's the widows mite. The Pharisees put big bundles of cash in the treasure but the widow put a small coin. To them, their cash was a well-measured tenth – but to her it was everything she had – and she was the rich one! I'm not so sure how true this is amongst modern churches but I suspect in 2000 years there's nothing new under the sun!

In fact, perhaps the people that need to examine themselves most are those who are rich. They have been shown much grace, so they have much grace to show. I remember that Cliff Richard said that he considered becoming a teacher when he became a Christian, but he decided to continue singing because even though he has a rich man's lifestyle as a pop star, he gives away an enormous chunk of his wealth – and he did it because he could and as I said this morning, generous giving is a good witness. And St Cliff has a good testimony despite the jibes because there has never been any suggestion about impropriety in the way he handles his wealth - quite the reverse.

So time to examine our lives. I've avoided saying too much specifically about the church's problems today. I think it is more appropriate to discuss them more directly in the church meeting. Our job is to look at the grace God has given us in abundance and respond graciously in the support of His work in this church and throughout the world.

There are three kinds of givers - the flint, the sponge and the honeycomb. To get anything out of a flint you must hammer it. And then you get only chips and sparks. To get water out of a sponge you must squeeze it, and the more you use pressure, the more you will get. But the honeycomb just overflows with its own sweetness. Which kind of giver are you?

Preached by Mark Reid

MRBC Felixstowe

30/3/08

Scripture quotes TEV unless otherwise stated.