

SCRIPTURE TEXT: Leviticus 27:1, 30-34
SERMON SERIES: Joyful Generosity
SERMON TITLE: The Holy Tithe

This morning, we're going to talk about tithing. Tithing is that biblical practice described in Leviticus that in those days involved setting apart—or making holy—one-tenth of one's agricultural produce, herds and flocks for God's purposes. In fact, this one-tenth was said to belong to God. Today, the tithe involves other resources like our money, for example. And in our context, the tithe is given to support the work of the church.

Now it's interesting to me that if we look up the word *tithing* in the *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, which is a reference book containing explanatory articles on every significant word in the New Testament, we'll find on the page after the article on *tithing*, an article under the heading, *torment*. When one pastor noticed this, he thought to himself: *Tithing and torment—now that'll preach!*¹

So here I am today, preaching a sermon on *tithing* and the word *torment* seems an appropriate pairing because this is a sermon uncomfortable for me to preach. The truth is, I had just as soon not be up here this morning talking to you about tithing—or about anything else that has to do with how we handle our possessions or how much we give. The truth is, I want to be left alone to handle my wealth in any way that I see fit. So for me, there is a fair amount of *torment* that goes along with preaching about tithing and the whole topic of money, wealth and possessions, and my own giving.

When I think about it however—like during stewardship campaigns--and I consider how much I give and how I handle my money and possessions—and I take into account how I feel

¹ "The Top Five Reasons Why I Don't Tithe." *Speaking of stewardship model sermons on money and possessions*. Louisville, Ky: Geneva, 1998. 59. Print.

about all of these things—I come to a disturbing realization. How many of you have ever seen the cable TV show called *Intervention*? *Intervention* takes us into the world of substance abusers and the interventions that their loved ones arrange so that the abusers can be confronted with their addictions in the hope that each of the addicts will make a choice for health and wholeness. In almost every case, there is some level of *torment* involved as the addict confronts the reality of addiction. And then the addict has to make a choice—either to take a step toward health and wholeness by going into rehab—or to suffer the consequences of continued addiction.

So what's the realization in this for me? Well, it occurs to me that the reason I experience some level of torment in dealing with tithing and money and wealth and possessions, is because I'm way too attached to things for my own spiritual health and well-being. I'm like an addict—and the thought of letting go of that to which I am so attached—scares me to death.

At the same time, I long for joyful generosity, but I am so weighed down with anxiety about my stuff—that I feel stuck. And I don't want to be stuck—I want to free—even though I'm afraid to be free! I really don't want to use money to just get what I want, when I want it. I don't want to use money as a source of power over others or as a means of gaining status and acceptance for myself.

What I long for is to be so wrapped up in God's love that I don't worry about money. I want to be so moved by the needs of others that I open my hands to share freely and joyously. I want to be open to the possibility of spending myself poor so that the poor might live. And I want to be as generous in supporting the needs of my spiritual family which is the church—as I am in supporting the needs of my wife and our children.

So what does all of this have to do with tithing? Well, it seems to me that tithing is a disciplined step toward liberation and health.

Now I realize that biblically speaking, it's hard to get an exact fix on the tithe. As one commentator has noted, *tithing was understood and practiced differently at different times and localities through the Biblical period.*² Most often, the tithe was used to support priests and places of worship like the Temple. The poor were to be supported by the tithe. Deuteronomy instructs God's people to have a feast and eat their tithes in the Temple. And as we see in Leviticus, if worshippers lived outside of Jerusalem, they could redeem their produce and livestock for money, add one-fifth to the offering, buy food stuffs with the money, and then make their offering in the Temple.

In the New Testament, tithing is barely mentioned at all. In Matthew 23, Jesus criticizes the scribes and Pharisees for their tithing because they neglected the weightier matters of the law like justice and mercy and faith. But then Jesus turns around and affirms the tithe. He says, *It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others* which says to me that tithing is a minimum for giving, not a maximum, it's a starting point and not an ending point—in fact, it says to me that joyful generosity can't be reduced to a percentage calculation.

So given all of this, why is tithing a disciplined step toward liberation and health? Well, it seems to me that tithing invites us to trust God more fully—and when we trust God more fully, freedom and health are the results. Israel understood this. In fact, tithing was a common practice in the ancient Near East, especially in Mesopotamia. Tithes were collected to support religious sanctuaries devoted to the worship of Mesopotamian deities. Kings also used the tithe as tax to support the government.

But for Israel, tithing was not about pagan gods or royal taxes (at least, not at first). Tithing was the will of their God. It was *The Lord* who spoke to Moses on Mt. Sinai. It was

² Tithe." *The HarperCollins Bible Dictionary*. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1996. 1157. Print.

God who gave him the commandments—including the command to tithe.

So when the Israelites did tithe they proclaimed their freedom to worship their God—and not the kings and gods of other cultures. It was the word of their God that made the tithes holy. And in the giving of their tithes, the Israelites gave to God their allegiance and their trust.

Now this is how one modern-day tither expresses it: *There are lots creditors who want a piece of me and my paycheck. There are all sorts of other concerns that compete for my attention and my money. But I write out my check to the church first, before I pay anything else. It is my way of saying that I belong to God before anybody else can get a piece of me.*³

Now to me this sounds like freedom and it sounds like health.

And besides, tithing calls us to thankfulness and to celebration. The scriptures provide us examples God's people giving their tithes in an atmosphere of thanksgiving and celebration—which—in my book—are signs of freedom and health.

And I want this kind of life for myself because I know that God has given me so much and I desire to live a life of gratitude that gives back generously. But once again, fear squelches gratitude and inhibits celebration. As long as I hold on to that which I possess as if it really did belong to me, my life is diminished. So the tithe can be a disciplined step toward liberation and health that's marked by joyful thanksgiving and celebration.

So that's enough from me on tithing. I invite you now to hear your brothers and sisters in Christ bear witness to the power of tithing. **VIDEO.**

As we move toward Commitment Sunday one week from today, I invite you to consider the holy tithe as a disciplined step toward liberation and health. But please understand, if you don't tithe, there is still a place for you in this church because we're all on this journey together.

³ "The Top Five Reasons Why I Don't Tithe," 63.

And for that I say: Thanks be to God.