

Let's Get Practical

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[0 : 00] Well, hey, good morning. My name is Ray Sweep from First Christian Church in Greensburg, Indiana. And as always, if you'd like to learn a little more about us, you can go to FCCGreensburg.com or you can check out the FCC Greensburg Facebook page.

But hey, thank you so much that you have decided today to tune in to the preaching of God's Word. Our heart here at FCC is always to get into the Word of God, but most of all, let that Word get into us and transform these hearts.

Now, we are in the last week of our series called Happily Generous. This is week number four. The message is called Let's Get Practical. And it comes from, and you can go ahead and turn to, Malachi chapter 3, starting in verse 7.

Now, there was a man who was trying to share his faith in Jesus. And he just so happened to be talking to one of his co-workers. And he asked the guy, are you a Christian? And the guy, seeming a little caught off guard, said, oh yeah, for sure.

Well, having been around the guy for a little while, he hadn't seen a whole lot of fruit of Christianity in his life. So he nudged a little further. Well, where do you go to church?

[1 : 13] A member of a church? Man, that's not necessary. The dying thief wasn't a member of a church, and he went to heaven. So, he kept prodding a little bit. And he said, so, you've given your life to Jesus then, and you've been baptized into him?

Been baptized? Oh no, that's another unnecessary ceremony. I'm as safe as the dying thief, and he was never baptized. Well, since you won't join a church and be baptized, is there any way that you show your faith in Christ?

Maybe you give of your means to help spread the gospel to the ends of the earth? And the guy once again stared at him with this very nonchalant look on his face, and said, no sir, I don't give anything with how expensive it is to live.

Once again, the dying thief. It's biblical. Well, finally the guy was losing his patience a little bit. And he said, well, before we go any further, you seem to be on intimate terms with the dying thief.

You appear to get a lot of consolation from his career, but you have to realize one big difference between you and him. He was a dying thief.

[2 : 23] You are a living one. And I've got to guess the conversation stopped right there. And I do not recommend that to be your model for evangelism. But you know, his comment was biblical, and it was in context, as we're going to see today.

And before we go there, I want to just welcome you back to the last week of our series. We've been using a book called, a book based on biblical principles by Mike Kokolowski, called Happily Generous.

And for the first three weeks, it was a helpful guide as we went deep into our own hearts. But today we're going to step away from the book to a message that I think is so important for the church.

You could basically call this the nuts and bolts of giving. Or you could say, hey, let's just get practical. See, what I've discovered with this being my third time leading our church family through a stewardship series is that there are quite a few, especially new believers, which we are so blessed to have in our church, who just don't understand the practical side of being faithful to the Lord in this area of finances.

And some of you have come to me asking questions like, hey, what is a tithe? What are you guys talking about? What's an offering? Is there a difference between a tithe and an offering?

[3 : 43] Or are they basically the same thing? And it's not that many don't have a desire to be faithful to Jesus in this area. It's that we need to understand on a practical level what this looks like.

So go ahead and grab your Bibles and turn to the very last Old Testament book of Malachi. If you come to the New Testament, so Matthew's the first book or Mark or Luke or John, just hit reverse a little bit.

And as you're turning to Malachi, let me fill you in on kind of what's happening in this small book. So you have the last of the Old Testament prophets, a man named Malachi, just like the book name. And to be honest with you, we really don't know a lot about him other than he served during a time of spiritual blah, a time of spiritual apathy for the nation of Israel. And after spending 70 years in bondage and slavery in Babylon, the Israelites had finally returned home to the promised land. They rebuilt the temple. They rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. That gave them some measure of national pride and strength. But you know what? Spiritually, this nation was still just a shell of its former self.

[4 : 56] Yes, they were back in God's chosen land, but man, their hearts were so far from the Lord. Onto the scene comes this man sent by God. His name literally means messenger, and that's exactly what he did.

He wasn't there to win a popularity contest. He wasn't there to be a motivational speaker. He wasn't there to make everybody feel all warm and toasty. He came for one purpose, to share a strong message that came straight from the Lord.

And in the first couple of chapters, Malachi confronts the sins of who are supposed to be God's people. The priests, who are supposed to be leading the nation spiritually, they were insulting God by offering him animals that were blind, crippled, and diseased when they were supposed to be sacrificing the best right off the top.

Basically, they were giving God the leftovers. Many of the men were leaving their wives and their families to run after foreign women who worshipped false gods. And on top of all of this, they were exploiting the poor, depriving the people of justice, and neglecting the widows and the orphans among them.

These people, even though they went to, I guess you could say, church, they had hearts that were so very cold. And God, in his compassion, is calling them back to himself, showing them grace, giving them another chance, just like he does for you and me so very often.

[6 : 25] See, that's called mercy. Now, look with me at the start of our passage here in Malachi 3, verse 7. God, speaking to his people, says, Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them.

Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, How are we to return? Now, if you're a note taker, feel free to grab your outlines there in your bulletins.

You can also go to the YouVersion Bible app under Events, under First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana, and you can see the outline that way, especially if you're listening through the radio here.

So, fill in this first practical question that we need to be able to answer yes to today before we can really honor God. And here's the question for our hearts. Are you all in?

Wow, that was what, right? Are you all in? See, in this passage, when God calls these people to return to him, the word return is stronger than how we may use it.

[7 : 39] It's basically the same as the word repent that we see throughout the New Testament. And repent means to turn away from the old sinful lifestyle that's all about me, what I want, what I think, and I'm turning away from my sin and my selfishness, and I am making the decision to turn to God in his ways.

I am waving the white flag, a surrender to the God of all creation, and more than just tears streaming down my face, I'm making that commitment that you, Lord, you have all of me, even the closets, even the attic, those secret areas of my life, I give it to you.

Even Friday night, Saturday night, even my business ethics, all of me, 24-7, 365. So as we look at this passage, this was really a gracious invitation on God's part.

Despite generations of hypocrisy and blatant sin, even symbolically spitting in God's face with their words saying one thing and then their actions speaking quite another message, God in his amazing love was still willing to forgive, to bless, to restore them to their rightful places as people.

And before we start pointing fingers at these Israelites and say, man, they were really dumb, we better make sure that we're not doing the exact same dumb thing because our God meets us in our darkest sins, in our wrong motives, in our impure hearts, and he can transform them to beat for him.

[9 : 12] In fact, 1 Timothy 2, verses 3 and 4, this is good and pleases God our Savior who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth.

And then in 1 John 4, verse 10, God's word says, this is love, not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his son as an atoning sacrifice for our sins.

And then 1 John 4, 19 says, we love because he first loved us. And before we can come to a place where we want to truly glorify God in our giving or really any other area of our life, our hearts have to be sold out to Jesus.

And it's amazing the response I've gotten when I've preached on this topic. I've even had someone come up to me in the past and say, Ray, I didn't realize giving is so connected to my heart.

I thought I had a giving problem. Now I realize I have a faith issue, a trust issue. They said, I've trusted God in so many other areas of my life and he has proven himself time and time again.

[10 : 18] But now I realize I need to trust him kind of in this last area, my giving, because my offering comes from the overflow of my heart, the overflow of my faith.

And I thought, right on, preach it. See, those are the people who make preachers want to come to work on Mondays, okay? And yes, we do work on Mondays. But on a serious note, they were right. Jesus said it this way in Matthew 6, 21. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. It's amazing how connected our finances and stuff are to the heart.

It's worship to the Lord as I show that I trust him. Okay, now that we're all in and I pray that we all are, let's get down to kind of the nuts and bolts of it all.

Here's the second question. What are tithes and offerings? And to answer this, let's head back to Malachi 3 and pick up where we left off in verse 8.

[11 : 18] God's word asks this question. Will a mere mortal rob God? And then God says, yet you rob me. Now, could you imagine that? God telling you that you are robbing him?

And then watch this. He said, but you ask, how are we robbing you? And God just gives him to it straight, okay? In tithes and offerings.

So the first question we have to answer is this. What's a tithe? Not my opinion of what it should be, not what I want it to mean, but what is a tithe according to what God's word teaches?

If you look at the Old Testament, a tithe was one-tenth of a person's income that was given back to the Lord. The word tithe literally means 10%.

And then in Leviticus chapter 27, starting in verse 30, it says, a tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord.

[12 : 22] It is holy to the Lord. And then verse 32, every tithe of the herd and flock, every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod will be holy to the Lord.

So let's break this down a little bit. During Old Testament days, so that would be before Christ came into the world, part of their covenant with God was to give back a tenth of everything.

And they didn't quite have the money system that we have today, so they sacrificed and they gave 10% from maybe their crops or their animals or whatever it was that they did for a living, which was usually crops or animals, but it could have been other stuff.

And let me give you an example of this, maybe a little modern day example from a child. There was a preacher who had a little boy in his church named Dustin. And one day, Dustin came to church with a pack of Smarties.

And because you and I have eaten probably our share of this candy, we know that there are, I don't know, maybe 10 or 12 in a pack. The preacher just couldn't help himself. He was trying to have some fun with the boy, so he said, hey, can I have one of those Smarties?

[13 : 27] And without hesitation, Dustin smiled and he handed one over. The preacher was so impressed. This happened for a couple weeks until it became just a fun little tradition between the two of them.

Every time Dustin had Smarties, he'd take the first one out and he'd save it and give it to the preacher. And every Sunday before the worship service started, he'd track his pastor down and give him his one Smartie.

Sometimes Dustin would even open a pack during the week and he'd save the first one by putting it in his pocket. And when he came on Sunday, that Lent-covered Smartie was given to the preacher who always decided to enjoy it later.

See, that's a pretty good example of what God's asking from us today. And when we get our paycheck, let's just be very practical here. It doesn't matter whether you make \$20, \$200, \$2,000,

\$20,000.

He's asking us as his managers of the resources that belong to him anyways, that we will simply set aside that tithe, that 10% to be given back to his church to say, thank you God for everything you've blessed me with.

[14 : 37] Thank you for Jesus and going to the cross for my sins. I give this back to you so that more people can come to eat of the bread of life and drink of the living water that's found in Christ alone.

So, we've kind of quickly answered what is a tithe? So, literally, 10%. But here's our next question that even less people understand. What's an offering?

And yes, there is a difference between a tithe and an offering. If you read through the scriptures and you study this out a little bit, an offering was a gift that was over and above a tithe.

For example, probably about 18 years ago, the church did a capital campaign for the family life center that we have here to build it and to update our sanctuary and do a few other things.

And they asked the church to stay faithful in their regular giving of their tithe because the regular ministries we had had to continue. But then they said, please pray about going over and above that number to help prepare our church for growth.

[15 : 38] And praise God, this church family went above and beyond and that has all been paid off for several years now. And it's allowed us to grow. It's allowed us to do more ministry for the glory of God, although we are outgrowing it too now.

So the tithe goes to support the ongoing ministry of the church and offering goes to meet special needs inside or outside of the church. So to put it very just basic, a tithe is my 10% that I give back to the storehouse, my church, the place where I'm fed spiritually, where I have a support system. And my offering is anything above that to go wherever God places a need on my heart. And that could be special projects. It could be giving opportunities that happen in our church because we do some of those throughout the year.

Or it could be another organization that you trust. Like for Bethany and I, we have an organization that we love called Compassion International. And we have had the privilege to give around, the numbers change just a little bit with inflation, but around \$45 a month to help a little girl named Catherine from El Salvador get food, medical attention, and education, and even learn all about Jesus.

We've supported her since she was four. She is 21 now, attending the university, and our time of sponsoring her will soon be coming to an end. But an offering could be helping anyone just like that.

[17 : 05] That's just one example of millions. Helping anyone in need that God brings into your path. Just follow the Holy Spirit's leading. And now let's go to the New Testament, to 1 Corinthians 16, where the Apostle Paul breaks down how we're supposed to do this.

Okay, here's what he says. Now about the collection for the Lord's people, do what I told the Galatian churches to do on the first day of every week. Each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income, saving it up, so that when I come, no collections have to be made.

So there are three things I want to show you from that passage. Here's the first thing. Give regularly. Here's the words Paul uses on the first day of the week.

Now, I don't think God intended this to be some legalistic command because the reality is we have some who get paid every week, some or every other, others once a month. You think about farmers and maybe some others who might be just a few times a year.

But the point here is to give regularly so we're giving right off the top. We're not leaving God any leftovers. And it really is amazing when we give that 10% of our best right off the top, God will bless that 90% more than we can even understand.

[18 : 28] Remember that equation we said last week, 90% plus God equals more? So make that a habit. The Lord comes first before anything else because Lord, I don't want to give you my leftovers.

I want to be all in. So give regularly. Second, give personally. It says each one of you, no matter how old we are, every one of us who belong to Jesus has a responsibility to honor God.

I love to hear stories about small kids learning the power of tithing back to the Lord. And I really believe as a Christian parent, if we start to model how important tithing is, teaching our children from a young age how they can be a part of what God is doing, I think we'll be surprised how they're going to follow our lead and they're going to want to.

For instance, we have bought, and you could Google this, you could find it, and you could even buy it for your kids, but we have bought what's called a Dave Ramsey bank for each of our kids. It's kind of like a three-sided bank and it has three slots in it. One says give, one says save, and one says spend. And what we're doing is we're teaching our children when they get their commission, is what we call it, that God has to come first.

[19 : 42] So the first thing they do is they put their tithe money into the give. And then next, they put a little bit of money in to save. That's wise.

The Bible talks about that. And then, they get so much money for spend. So parents, grandparents, guardians, let's start by modeling this to our kids and then training them up to be faithful in their giving as well.

And one thing I've discovered is that kids can be so much more generous than adults at times. And then the third thing is give proportionally. Give proportionally.

based on what you have. So it says in this passage, in keeping with your income. The people Paul was talking to had been taught the scriptures. They've been taught to tithe since they became believers.

So I really believe Paul is just reminding them of this spiritual habit. He's saying, listen, it doesn't matter how much you make. You're not called to compete with the person next to you and try to give more than them. You're called to be faithful with what God has given you.

[20 : 46] And listen, that can be different for all of us. All the statistics that I've ever seen even teach that the lower middle class give more proportionally than the rest.

And sometimes the wealthy give the least amount. So it really doesn't matter what you make. It's all about faithfulness to the Lord. And you know, I've had a lot of questions where people sincerely ask me, what am I supposed to tithe from?

Is it the net or is it the gross? And after, so basically what they're asking is, is it after my check has been taxed, the net, or before the tax, which is the gross?

And my answer is yes. See, scripture doesn't come right out and directly say. Now, I think I could make a case for the gross based on how they would have given in the Old Testament.

But here would be my challenge to you because it's all about the heart. If you're not giving 10% and you have a heart to be faithful to the Lord in this way, then start working your way to the net. God will honor that heart.

[21 : 48] When you get there and you see how God has provided and blessed your faith, then work towards the gross. And when you get there, you can realize that a tithe is just a starting point and you don't even have to stop there. I've heard of people giving 60, 70, 80% by the end of their life.

You can continue to trust God's leading in this area. A man once came to Peter Marshall who was a former chaplain of the United States Senate and he had some concern about his tithing.

I mean, this was a Christian man. He said, I have a problem. I've been tithing for a while and it wasn't so bad when I made \$20,000 a year. I could afford to give \$2,000. But now that I'm making \$500,000, there's no way I can afford to give \$50,000 annually.

Well, Peter Marshall thought about it for a second and said, well, sir, I do see that you have a problem. I think we ought to pray about this. And the man said, yeah, let's pray. So Dr. Marshall bowed his head and here's what he prayed.

Dear Lord, this man has a problem. I pray that you'll help him. Please reduce his salary back to the place where he can afford to tithe. Amen. I bet that would overwhelm, right?

[22 : 57] But here's the point. If every one of us is faithful to give back that tithe from the resources God blesses us with, instead of just the 13% of evangelicals who tithe according to the statistics that we looked at a couple weeks ago.

If every one of us will be faithful, you'll be amazed at the work that God can do through us to build his kingdom. Money would never be an issue for any church if even probably half chose to tithe. Now, I'm going to close this message with one of the greatest promises in the Bible straight from our creator. Here's the promise that follows everything we've talked about today. So Malachi chapter 3, verse 10.

The Lord says, Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough to store it.

So here's my childish dare for you after hearing the Lord say, Test me. I triple diggity dog dare you to take God at his word, to be a happily generous follower of Jesus.

[24 : 19] And you watch how he will show up and bless you in every way. Yes, he can and will bless you financially. It's not a get-rich-quick scheme that some people maybe with wrong motives might think, but he promises to meet every need.

He will take care of you. And you know what? He can bless you in more important ways that go way beyond something as common as money. How about hope and peace and joy? The things our hearts really long for.

The things that truly matter. Because he is looking for men and women, boys and girls, who will trust him fully in every area of their lives. And when we do, what does the word say?

He will do immeasurably more than we could ever ask or imagine. I want to close with a story that just touched my heart. It happened here at the church just a few weeks ago.

I had a high school boy come up to me and give a generous check to the church. And it wasn't his parents' money either. It was his. And I'm sure he could have thought of all kinds of ways that he could have spent it.

[25 : 22] But instead, he gave. See, he had served at the fair for a week and was paid for his work. And he simply walked up to me on a Wednesday night and said that he wanted to give it back to the Lord.

And church, listen, that's the heart that the Lord will honor. That is a happily, generous heart. Pray with me. Father, we are just so thankful for how you have just preached your word into our hearts throughout this series.

I thank you that you have shown us that this is not about a guilt trip. This is not about making people feel bad or anything like that. But it's all about hearts that want to truly honor you.

To be great managers of the resources that you have blessed us with. Time, talent, and treasure.

So Father, I just pray as we have simply looked at the nuts and bolts, the practical side of giving, and exactly what a tithe is, what an offering is, how I give, when I give, all that kind of stuff.

As we have just kind of been very real in our teaching today about this is exactly what you've called us to. Lord, we know ultimately it comes down to that first question we asked.

[26 : 40] Are you all in? Am I all in? So Father, help me to truly be surrendered to your Lordship, to love you, and to serve you with all that I am, and I just pray that you will have your way in me in every way.

In Jesus' name I pray. Amen and amen. Hey, real quick, before we close out this message, I just want to give you a simple invitation.

Maybe you have been listening for a while, and God has just kind of been stirring your heart. Maybe you've been out of church for a while, and you're ready to come back.

You know, I don't know your story. Maybe you've never heard the gospel before at all, but I want to tell you the simple gospel right now, that Jesus loves you, that God so loved the world that he gave us one and only Son, that whosoever believes in him shall not perish, but have eternal life.

All of us have sinned against God. That sin separates us from a perfect and holy God, but yet he loved us so much that Jesus came to this earth, and he went to the cross, and gave his innocent life for our guilty ones.

[27 : 49] And then things got quiet. Satan thought that he had won, but on the third day, Jesus rose from the grave to conquer death and offer us life on this earth and life eternal.

So that's the gospel message that can change your life because it's changed billions of lives before you. And so I just want to give you this invitation. If you have questions about the church or want to talk about giving your life to Jesus or even other faith questions, please reach out.

Once again, we are First Christian Church, Greensburg, Indiana. My name is Ray Sweet. I'm the lead pastor, and you can contact us in two ways. 812-663-8488.

812-663-8488 is our phone number. Or you can email me at ray at FCCgreensburg.com. Hey, God bless you.

Hope you have a fantastic week.