

## Offering

*Sermon Preached by the Rev. Robert A. Arbogast  
Celebration Fellowship, Ionia, Michigan  
May 7 & 8, 2018*

## Scripture

*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 there will not be room enough to store it.*

Malachi 3:10

## Sermon

Today's theme is *Offering*. And a good place to start is with the prophet Malachi. Like the other prophets, he spoke for the Lord God. And like those other prophets, he called on Israel to be faithful. And he said an important part of faithfulness concerned their offerings to God. "Bring the whole tithe," he said. (That's Malachi 3:10.) "Bring the whole tithe."

God expected his people to bring the tithe every year. That was their basic offering. And in case you don't know, a tithe is a tenth. So it was ten percent of everything they grew, ten percent of everything they produced. In our language, that's one dollar out of every ten dollars you earn, or ten dollars out of every hundred. It sounds like a lot, doesn't it? Well, it is a lot.

YEARS AGO, I HEARD a preacher. He tried to convince us that a tithe isn't so much. He said, "Picture David as a shepherd. He's counting his sheep, and he's setting aside the tithe. So it's 1 for God, and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 for me. 1 for God, and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 for me. 1 for God, and 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 for me. That's a lot of sheep for David, isn't it? And not so many for God, not really. So it's a pretty good deal actually." That's what the preacher said.

But that's not the whole picture, is it? No; it's not. Because it's 1 for God, 1 for Kent County, 2 for Uncle Sam, 3 for Calvin College, 2 for the bank, and 1 for me. And that doesn't even include a budget for honeybuns!

RICH DERIDDER TOLD a different story. He was one of my seminary professors. And when he told us about tithing, he was honest about it. He said tithing was a sacrifice. Because obedience to the Lord is a sacrifice. Here's what he told us.

When Rich was a kid, his father would gather the family around the kitchen table to watch him divide up his weekly pay. Back in those days people were paid in cash, and Rich's father would lay a tall stack of bills on the table. Then he would peel off a portion of the bills as a tithe to the church. The stack wasn't so tall anymore. Then he would peel off another portion. This was for Christian schooling for the kids. It was part of obedience to the Lord.

By now the original stack of bills wasn't tall at all. Rich's father would point to that shortened stack, and he would say, "This is what we have to live on." And he would give thanks to God. Tithing is a sacrifice. Obedience to the Lord is a sacrifice.

I HEARD ANOTHER STORY years ago. It went like this. A preacher gave a sermon on tithing. Afterwards a man from the congregation came up to him with a worried look on his face. He said, "Pastor, do you mean I'm supposed to give 10 percent of all I make? Every year?" "That's right," the pastor said. And the man protested: "I made \$400,000 last year. Now you're telling me I need to tithe \$40,000? I can't afford that!"

Well, the pastor was a good pastor, so he offered the man some comfort. "I can see you're troubled by all this," he said. "How about I say a prayer for you?" The man said, "Oh, please do. Pray for me." And the pastor said, "Lord, you can see how troubled Bill is about tithing. And you know what a burden it would be for him to have to give \$40,000. So, Lord, please reduce Bill's income to the point where he can afford to tithe."

It's a good story. But it misses the point somewhat. Because it's always a sacrifice to give, no matter how much or how little we have to work with. Maybe you remember the story Jesus told about a poor widow who gave a tiny bit to the Temple treasury. He said her gift was more than all the others because it cost her everything she had. For her, it was a greater sacrifice.

WE'RE ALL IN DIFFERENT PLACES when it comes to our resources. Some of us on the outside make a bundle of money. Some of us are on fixed incomes that get smaller every year. Some of us on the inside have good jobs: \$40, \$60, even \$100 a month! Some of us don't have the money to buy a few packets of soup. So we're all in different places when it comes to our resources.

But whether we have a little or a lot, everything we have comes from the Lord. And that's not all. Because whether we have a little or a lot, everything we have belongs to the Lord. Because the earth is the Lord's and everything in it. (That's Psalm 24:1.)

Now, if everything we have belongs to the Lord, then it's only right that we should give some of it back to the Lord. Actually, it's only right that we should give the best part of it back to the Lord.

ON THE OUTSIDE, we write checks or pull out our credit cards. Once in a great while we even use cash. And the money goes toward sustaining Christian congregations, resettling refugees from Syria, sinking wells in sub-Saharan Africa, and supporting our local public schools.

On the inside, you have to be more creative. At the same time, on the inside you can be more personal. You offer gifts of time, talent, treasure, temple, terrain, task, and transmission. You offer those gifts to the Lord. You offer those gifts to each other, to the church here inside. And you offer those gifts to your neighbors.

I don't know how the rules limit what you can do inside. But you do tell the story, don't you? You share the good news. You do sing to the glory of God, don't you? You offer the sacrifice of praise. You do pray for your bunkie, don't you? You take the time to seek his blessing. You do pick up litter, don't you? You tend the garden of God. You do share a cook-up, don't you? You feed the hungry.

You have great imaginations. I know you do. So you'll keep on finding ways to offer up part of what God has entrusted to you, the best part of what God has entrusted to you. That's what we all do. We offer it up to the Lord. It's part of our obedience, the obedience of faith.

OKAY, LET'S GET SOME perspective on that. The Lord blesses us, blesses us generously. The Lord provides us with everything we have and with everything we need. So we give, and we give generously. We give because God has first given to us. We give, especially, because God has given us the priceless gift of his one and only Son, Jesus.

So the offerings we bring to God—whatever it is we offer—the foundation is always the same: gratitude, gratitude to God—gratitude for the gift of Jesus Christ, gratitude for the presence of the Holy Spirit, gratitude for rescuing us and giving us a new life. We give because we are grateful, grateful for everything we have received.

MAYBE YOU'VE HEARD me mention the Heidelberg Catechism. It's an old teaching tool used by Reformed churches. It was written in Germany 450 years ago! Well, that Catechism is divided into three parts. The first part is about the mess we're in because of idolatry and sin. The second part is about God's solution to the mess we're in. And the solution is Jesus! (But you knew that, didn't you?)

The third part of the Catechism is about the way we live as followers of Jesus. And that way of life is summed up in one word: gratitude. All of our living, all of our loving, all of our praising, all of our working, all of our praying, all of our giving—it's all comes from gratitude.

We don't give because there's a rule that says we have to. We don't give because the roof will fall in if we don't. And we don't give because we're worried about what the neighbors will think—or the deacons at church!

No; we give because we're grateful. We give because God has given us so much. We give because God has given us everything. And we give because, like any father, God is pleased when his children show a little gratitude—or a lot.

✠

Glory and thanks be to God:  
Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.

✠