

### 1. Introduction

In the name of God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today we continue with the series of stewardship and dedication season, and our theme is about ***'Tithing: A training exercise for the heart'*** – exploring the importance of tithing in cultivating a life of faith. The readings for this morning are guiding us to unpack the theme and to hear what God is to say, and what God wants us to do for Him, for ourselves, for the Church and for the others.

### 2. Scenario – “The Blessed Life” by Robert Morris

As I was preparing for this sermon, I took a short break, and then read a chapter in the book titled ***“The Blessed Life”*** by Robert Morris. This book has echoed in my mind a scenario of a gentleman who went to his Pastor and sought for prayer because he was struggling to pay up his tithe. He approached his Pastor, and said to him *“Pastor, my name is John, I’m having a problem with tithing lately”* he confessed. The Pastor asked, *“what seems to be [the] problem?”* He said *“well, Pastor, I used to earn R50 a week, and tithe R5 which was easy. And then I used to earn R500 a week, and then tithe R50 which was okay. But now, I earn R5000 a week, I am having a hard time. A R500 tithing is a lot of money. Will you please pray for me?”* then Pastor said, *“okay, no problem John let’s pray”*, *“Father, Almighty, please reduce John’s income back to R500 a week, so that he can continue to honour you with the tithe!* John looked at the Pastor very shocked, surprised and dismayed of the prayer.

### 3. Reflection on the scenario

This scenario illustrates a common trap most people fall into in their thinking about giving to God. We want to tithe as smallest as possible, and it can’t be the other way. In John’s scenario, he compared the initial tithe of R5 to the current tithe of R500. In his mathematics, he is concerned about the loss of R495. Probably, John didn’t fully understand why he was tithing in the very first place. When he earned R50 a week, he tithed correctly, then God blessed Him with a new earning of R500 a week. Even here, he tithed correctly, then God blessed Him again with a new earning of R5000. This is where he has fallen short of his faith to tithe. He wants to tithe less or not tithe at all. God says *“bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that they may be food in my house. Test me in this and see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing. That there will be not room enough to receive it”* (Mal. 3:10-12).

John thought he will be short of money to meet up his personal needs. We understand that money has its good and bad side, we need to buy food, pay bonds, education, healthcare, clothes, pleasure and so on. On other hand, it brings much evil such as greed, selfishness, cruelty, suffering. In South Africa alone, institutions of high integrity are threatened by corruption, serious greed and reputational risk because of

money. It instills violence, killing, and so on. But what is the voice of God in all these things? Is our nation cursed? Are we robbing God – to withhold that which belongs to Him? This seems to be what’s happening in Malachi’s time – the Lord Almighty was sobbed to the people of Israel and said, “*you have robbed me*”, the people of Israel asked, “*in what way we have robbed you?*” (v.8b). The Lord Almighty said “*in tithes and offerings*” they have kept that which belonged to God, that is, tithes and offerings.

## Old Testament

### 4. Tithing

The meaning of the word ‘*tithe*’ in the Hebrew word, means “*tenth*” or “*ten percent*” In the Old Testament, there are three types of tithes that God requires. The first one is the “*Lord’s Tithe*” –which is intended to take care of the temple of God (the Church) and the welfare of the Priests (Leaders of the Temple/or the Church) (Leviticus 27:30). The second one is the “*Harvest Tithe*” – which is the tithe intended to encourage and maintain national morale and unity (Deut. 12:10-18). And lastly, the “*Tithe for the Poor*” – it is given as a welfare fund to take care of the needy, particularly, the orphans, the fatherless and widows (Deut. 14:28). There are many stories that have reference to tithing. I want to reflect Deuteronomy 26 and Malachi 3.

In Deuteronomy 26, we read a story of the Israelite man who was given the land by the Lord as an inheritance. This man was instructed to take the *first fruits of some produce* and give to the temple. He went to the temple as the Lord instructed. He made declaration of his family as the Lord instructed. The family moved to Egypt and they became a populous nation. The Egyptians oppressed the family and made them suffer. They cried to the Lord, and their voice was heard. The Lord rescued them from Egypt into the land that flows with milk and honey. In the Lord’s presence, the man and his father acknowledged God for giving them the Land he had promised, they have declared their gratefulness for the good things that the Lord God has done for them and celebrated the *tithe itself* as a concrete proof of God’s grace.

This man has essentially brought his full tithe to the Temple and said “... see *what God has given me*”. And having sat the gift down before the Lord, the next command was “*so you shall rejoice in everything which the Lord your God has given to you and your house, you and the Levites, and the stranger among you*” (Deut. 26:12). The giving was **not meant** to be dutiful and sombre, it was a celebration (of deliverance from Egypt), a rejoicing in the gifts of God (the land) and a sharing of that gift with those in need (the first fruits). The tenth was to be given to the Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows, and all people who did not have the capacity for whatever reason, to provide for their own needs, “*that they may eat in your towns and be satisfied*” (Deut. 26:12). All these things hark back to the character and power of God himself.

### 5. People of Israel during the time of Malachi ceased their tithing and were cursed

But the Israelites of the Malachi’s day were not fulfilling their covenant with the Lord, they were not tithing fully. Therefore, they were rebuked as the nation, because they were robbing God by not bringing the ‘**whole tithe**’ into the storehouse.

So, God told them *“bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that they may be food in my house. Test me in this and see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you such blessing. That there will be not room enough to receive it”* (Mal. 3:10-12).

There are three greater lessons of truth for us here to hear out of this text.

The *first one* is **God’s ability to abundantly provide for His people**. Are we afraid of giving because we will have less? Should we hold tightly what we have because, if we let it go, we will be impoverished? Sometimes, we might think along those lines. If I have a R1000 and tithe a R100 of God, and be left with R900, so I will have less, I won’t have enough for my needs? But **that’s not the way it works**. God Himself is saying ***“Test me ... and see if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you ... blessings. That there will be not room enough to receive it”*** (v10-11). God controls all things. If the Israelites gave their full tithes to the Lord, (1) God would have opened the windows of heaven and poured out blessings on them. (2) He would have prevented pests from destroying their crops. (3) He would have prevented the fruits from dropping prematurely. (4) They would have been so much **better off** if they had given that which belongs rightfully to God. Here, we are told... God would bless those who give their full tithe. **The 10% from our take-home salaries.** God controls all the wealth of the world. At any time, God can open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings on us, more than we can take in. This is the lesson, we need to take to heart. ***make tithing a training exercise for the heart.***

The *second lesson* is that **‘God is not after our money, He’s looking for our hearts’**. If our hearts are not into our giving, then our giving means nothing to God. This lesson resonates the behaviour of the Israel people in Amos’ day, they loved to brag about their tithes (Amos 4:5) but God would have nothing to do with them. God said, *“I hate, I despise your religious feasts, I cannot stand your assemblies, even though you bring me burnt and grain offerings, I will not accept them...”* (Amos 5:21-24). The people were giving to God, but they were cheating their fellow men. They were ignoring justice and righteousness. God, therefore, refused to accept their offerings, so they were in vain. God wants us to be completely devoted to Him. Giving is just part of that. God wants our heart, our obedience, He wants us all, He wants us to know that we can Trust Him. God, in Malachi says, *“return to me, I will return to you”* (3:7b)

The *third lesson* is that God is an abundant fountain of blessings. He promised if we are obedient in the tithes, He would pour out blessings that they would not have room to receive it. God has gone as far as saying, *“test me”, “prove me”* or *“try me”* and see if I will not open windows of Heaven and pour out blessings (Malachi 3v10b). It is God himself asking us to prove that He will make the promise. God wants us to tithe, so He can prove the point. It is this opportunity, in Malachi’s reading that we ‘prove Him’ and see the abundance of God’s blessings. In certain instances, it is wrong to prove God. Satan took Jesus Christ to pinnacle of the temple. And Satan was told *“Thou shall not tempt the Lord thy God”*. But here in Malachi’s reading, God Himself says *“test me”, “try me”, “prove me”*. This is only in this realm we are to seek to *“prove Him”* with our own *“tithes”* or *“ten percent”*. You give Him, He will bless you.

When we tithe and give back to God, we do not expect to receive back something of 'equal value' but in fact, we are introducing money to grace, and in turn, God's supernatural power will be released into our finances. With the tithing, we are seeking to demonstrate that money has no power in our lives, and that God is our source and will provide all our needs.

## New Testament lessons

### 6. Paul's message to the Elders

In the New Testament lessons, I want to begin with Paul's message to the Elders of the Church in Ephesus. In Acts 20v32, he says, "*I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and give you an inheritance among all those who are sanctified*" This comes after Paul shared his own ministry before he departed for Jerusalem. Encouraging the Elders to be shepherds of the Church of God and help the weak.

### 7. Paul in his own ministry recounts that –

He had faithfully served the Lord with humility, tears, and tests by plotting of the Jews. He preached the Gospel of grace fearless under trials and tribulations. He never ceased, until he had finished the work that the Lord called him to do. Paul before he departed for Jerusalem, he reminded the Elders the words of Jesus Christ that "*it is more blessed to give, than to receive*" (v.35). Paul didn't say these words in anticipation of anything, but he was simply pointing out the blessing that would come to Ephesus if they would give.

### 8. Church of Corinthian and Macedonia - 2 Corinthians 8:1-15 – Excel in Giving

In the New Testament Church, Paul was a self-supporting Apostle. He directed the Corinthians to put aside money on the first day of every week for the relief of the impoverished Christians in Jerusalem (1 Cor.16:1-4). Paul gives thanks to God for the example of the Macedonian Christians, that in their extreme poverty they excelled in generous giving. Paul believed that what made the Macedonians excel in generosity giving than the Corinthians is that, (1) the Macedonians responded to the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, revealed in the Gospel of God's self-giving, (2) they were blessed by the humility of the Man of Nazareth – Jesus Christ, the Son of God, (3) they enjoyed the love of God revealed in Christ. It is this cause that they surrendered their lives to God. They loved God with all their *mind*, with all their *soul*, with all their *heart* and all their *strength*. They gave as much as they could and even more than they could of their own free will. Paul reminds them that Jesus Christ was rich, but *he made himself poor* for their sake *to make them rich by means of his poverty* (2 Cor. 8:9).

Paul was urging the Corinthians to learn from Macedonians what it is to be – faithful Christians, the Stewards and ***how to be generous in giving*** in the building of the Kingdom of God (Good News Study Bible, 1992:1828-1829).

## 9. What principles should guide our giving?

Paul urged the Corinthians to give generously. But what principles should guide our giving in the Church of God. Paul suggests the following principles found in the Church of Macedonia. (2 Cor. 8:1-15; 9:1-15)

1. *Giving grows out of commitment* – first, we must give ourselves to the Lord, then the giving of money will follow. (8:5)
2. *Giving is the measure of love* – we want to test the sincerity of His love by comparing it with the earnestness of others (8:8)
3. *Giving is purposeful* – the goal of giving is to provide all Christians with the necessities, so they can live and serve the Lord (8:13-16)
4. *Giving benefits the giver* – generous giving brings a rich return- he who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully, will reap bountifully (9:6)
5. *Giving is self-determined* – so let each one gives cheerfully, not grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver (9:7)
6. *Giving brings spiritual blessings* – you will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through the apostle, your generosity will result in thanks giving to God. (9:11)

These are the principles that will guide our giving as the children of God. As Jesus Christ said, “*blessed are those who give than those who receive*”.

## 10. In my conclusion,

In conclusion, we learn from both the Old and New Testament that the people loved and surrendered their lives to the living God. They responded to God’s abundant grace:

- Giving their offerings of the first fruits to God
- They were tithing to God generously
- They gave much as they could and even more
- Their Christian churches were financially strong
- They were able to support God’s mission work.

Let’s give what belongs to God, and tithe faithfully, and see what God will do for us, as He promised to us, His untold blessings in overwhelming abundance. Let’s favour to be more givers, who are cheerfully and committed to the Lord Jesus Christ. And be guided in our giving by the principles we find in the New Testament Church of God. We ask all these in the name of Jesus Christ. Amen

THE END