



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to every individual

13025 Bell Air Drive, Auburn, CA 95603 (530) 823-3916 apc@auburnpresbyterian.org

“Was Blind, But Now I See” Psalm 24; Acts 11:1-18

If you missed worship last week, I’m sorry! It was pretty wild. To replicate something of what we might have experienced on that Holy Spirit Day, we played sounds of a terrible wind over the sound system, then one person stood up and spoke Greek, then another, Latin; then another, Spanish; then another, German, and French, or who-knows what. And occasionally, while all this was going on, someone would release a red balloon that would float up like a “tongue of fire”, lifting up a white dove made of paper. One of our guests turned to the people with her and said, “*What is going on??!*” That’s exactly the reaction we hoped for, because the Bible says the visitors in Jerusalem for the Pentecost Festival had that same reaction. Confusion, fear, faith—Wow!

This morning, we’re going to upset some of our visitors for another reason, and I want to apologize. There’s a rumor that goes around constantly, that the church is “just after your money”. Not true. This is the one Sunday out of 52 in which I address “giving to the church”. We talk about money at other times, but so did Jesus; he wasn’t scared of it. In fact, he addressed our decision-making about our assets more than any other topic. So, if you’re a guest this morning, please don’t take home the impression that we do this “always”. Instead, let me suggest that you play the role of observer, and observe “how these unafraid people talk about money decisions”. Let your curiosity loose, and enjoy this—as an observer—OK?

Now, for the rest of us, yep—it’s our yearly stewardship sermon. But I’m not going to focus on money this morning. Instead, like Jesus, I’m going to explore how we make decisions—about money, about possessions, about priorities. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there’s where your heart will be found, too.” Our money decisions show what we really care about, wouldn’t you agree?

You hear from a lot of churches saying, “Give a tithe”. “Tithe” is a Bible word, first used in Genesis 14, where Abraham gives to God 1/10 of everything he has; “tithe” means “one-tenth”. In those days, a tithe was considered fair rent for a tenant farmer to pay for the use of someone else’s land. Often landlords would charge far more—exorbitant, oppressive rates—all that “the market would bear”, as we say. But one-tenth was the base.

However, Psalm 24 teaches us, “The Earth is the Lord’s”. God is kinda like “The BIG Landlord”, so God should get a “tenth”, also. A tithe is our “rent for living on the planet”, so to speak. That kind-of makes sense.

The nice thing about one-tenth is, it’s so easy to figure. My step-mother taught me a trick for figuring a 15% tip at a restaurant. Take 10%--that’s really easy—then add ½ more. Easy, right? Giving a tithe is easy to figure, too.

But the “figuring” is not the issue. “Deciding” is the issue.

I want to put a radical idea in front of you today as we start to decide what we'll give to God's work through Auburn Presbyterian Church. Here's the idea: I think a tithe is too easy; it's even dangerous. Here's what I mean. Imagine you decide to "tithe" to the church. You're going to write on your pledge card this year the figure that represents 10% of your pre-tax--or maybe your after-tax--income. Or, maybe this year you'll start with 4%, and decide you'll raise it 1% in each of the next years, until you get to that magic 10%.

A-ha! There's the clue—the word, "magic". There's a temptation to "believe in magic" here, such as, "If I give 10%, I will satisfy God." Or, "If I give 10%, then I don't really have to do anything else for God." Or, "If I give 10%, then maybe God will answer my prayers more often." Or, "If I give 10% then I don't have to think through this decision again."

There are some big problems with the "tithe". First, the "tithe" is part of the Old Covenant that Jesus superseded. We live under a New Covenant; we worship God on Sunday, honoring God's raising Jesus from death, we do not worship on the Sabbath, but on The Lord's Day to honor God's raising Jesus from the dead. We do not on the Sabbath as the Ten Commandments say. So, tithing is not a law for Christians, either.

In the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15, "tithing" was not included in the requirements the elders laid on the Gentile converts. Gentiles, they decided they didn't have to become Jews first before they could be considered Christians. No, like James, the brother of Jesus said, the only requirements to be placed on Gentiles coming to Christ were to "abstain from food polluted by idols, from sexual immorality, from the meat of strangled animals and from blood. (Acts 15:19-20, NIV) "Tithing" is not there in this list.

No Christian has to tithe.

And even when we encounter it in the early Old Testament, giving a tithe was a one-time act of gratitude for a special favor.

"Tithing" is too easy. The dangerous part is, it reduces our relationship with God to a rule, and once we have the rule, we don't really need God again. Rule-bound religion assumes a quid-pro-quo—I follow the rules, and I'm IN with God. It seems like every week I am reminding us, "It's not about what you do, and how many rules you fulfill. It's who you know, and how you show your love for God."

How much do you WANT to give to God? See how much harder this question is, than simply setting a financial percentage and thinking we're done?!

Let me give you an example from Jesus. Toward the end of his ministry, Jesus has taken his followers back south to the Holy City of Jerusalem. They are like tourists; at least some of these guys had not been to the Royal City, or to the Temple. They were very impressed.

Jesus went to the Temple area. In one of the courtyards there was a large offering box, made of metal. In Jewish worship services, they did not pass a basket during worship; people were to bring their financial gifts to God and deposit them in this offering box before the service began. Remember, also: they had no paper money. They carried all their money in coins. So worshippers would approach the money box, with its horn-shaped funnel, and drop in the coins of their offering. And of course, that made some noise. If a rich man was trying to impress the

bystanders, he might get his offering changed from silver Dollar coins, into pennies, instead. So now he goes up to give a few bucks to the Temple, and all those coins make a big racket. Everyone around turns their heads to see who is being “so generous”. Jesus watches this public spectacle, and he is not impressed.

² [Then Jesus] also saw a poor widow put in two very small copper coins.” [The Greek word was “*lepton*”, which was perhaps worth a ‘mil’, 1/10 of one of our a pennies.] ³ “I tell you the truth,” he said, “this poor widow has put in more than all the others. ⁴ All these people gave their gifts out of their wealth; but she out of her poverty put in all she had to live on.” (Luke 21:1-4, NIV)

Now this woman did not give a tithe. She gave everything she had, even what she would have needed to buy her food for the next day. She trusted that God would, by the next evening, provide what she needed to keep herself alive. She didn’t have to give it. Her trust, her love, her confidence in God led her to give it all.

Wouldn’t it be harder to give all you have—**ESPECIALLY** if you have so little—than to give one tenth, if you have a lot? Jesus is making a point here. It’s not fulfilling the Old Testament ritual Law that gets God’s attention. It’s not the Law, it’s all about the relationship we have with God.

I know a woman who made a significant gift to the church from some money that came in totally unexpectedly. She did not give away everything—Jesus doesn’t ask that we all do that. This woman Jesus pointed out did not have to pay rent or utilities which others have a right to expect from us. And also, Jesus’ point was to cut down the public showiness of the rich, not to make a new rule that all Jesus’ followers have to give up everything. Some are called to do that; most are not. Jesus is asking us to decide, who between these two really loves God more?

There’s also a problem with this heroic “giving it all” act of this woman, if you ask me. She has left behind all responsibility to others, and has dropped her ability to choose. In a way, “giving all” is easy. It’s very freeing. People who go into religious orders, or monasteries, or cult groups find life so much easier, without so many financial decisions to make.

So here’s what I’m suggesting we do. Let’s give it all, but not give it to the church. Decide how you want to support the ministries we do here. (Let’s imagine you decide to give an amount that ends up being about 10% of your income.) Now, give the other 90%. What I mean is, be as intentional and God-directed about spending (or saving) the rest of your resources are you have been with the amount you decided to give to these ministries.

Some examples might help. Your young daughter needs a new dress. You talk with God about it. Normally, you might just buy something you and she like off the sale rack at Gottschalk’s, or from a catalog (in print, or on-line), and you’d be done with it. But you could also invest a bit more of your time, because you want this decision to honor God to the maximum extent possible. Perhaps, because you love God, you want to honor the earth God made; you search for a natural fabric. Perhaps, because you love God, you seek justice; you buy from a manufacturer who provides health insurance for the workers. This is a spending decision that involves some of “the other 90%” in our example, but you are bringing God into that decision, too.

You are not accepting the division so many people make between “spiritual life” and “real life”, as if there were a “secular world” and a “sacred world”. You are proclaiming that the God you worship is Lord of ALL, not just a nice religious figure you honor on occasion. And in this culture, you are even using “market forces” to make God’s will done “on earth as it is in heaven”. Whew!

Perhaps already I’ve opened your eyes to possibilities that have always been in front of you. Maybe already this morning, someone here is saying to themselves, “I never thought about that. I guess I was blind; but now I see.”

What determines your giving to God? Well, how much do you trust God? How much to you love God? How much do you know God loves you?

Jesus probably shocked some of his people with this observation about the heart of two folks who came to worship that day. But God is full of surprises, and our reactions to those surprises often reveal a lot about us.

Here’s an example from a few years into the growth of the Christian movement, from Acts, chapter 11. Open your Bibles to Acts 11, and listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY, as I read these words aloud, verses 1-18. *[text]*

Did you notice the big turn-around indicated in this passage? The “policy” for the early Church had been, everyone wanting to come to Jesus and follow him had to become a Jew first—circumcision for the men, ritual observances in the Temple, reading Hebrew, dietary regulations. THEN they could become Christians.

But with this startling encounter between God and Peter--and then with the Roman Centurion, Cornelius—it was suddenly clear to all that their “policy” had to be changed. Now, it’s not easy to change policy in any organization--but in a religious organization? It’s even harder, because everyone has been taught that way, and people have made sacrifices to support that common understanding. And besides, “God said so.” And, come on—this guy Cornelius was not just any Gentile, he was an enemy occupier, a commander in the army that was oppressing God’s people in God’s Promised Land. Give me a break!

For all that fortified foundation of faith to shift—that’s a major miracle. It was as though all the people in the Mother Church in Jerusalem said—at least for a time, and then again after Paul brought a similar issue before them—“We were blind. But now we see!”

John Newton, an American slave ship captain in the 1860’s, wrote those words into his famous song, “Amazing Grace” He had a total change of heart; he came to see slavery as wrong, and he walked away from his lucrative career to go into the ministry and work for social justice. “I once was lost, but now am found. Was blind, but now, I see.”

When it comes to your relationship with God, what do you take for granted? What beliefs have you not examined, perhaps since childhood? Could there be some “idols” lurking in there--cherished beliefs or customs that you hold to because someone important told you to, or because you’ve invested so much in maintaining them? Have these beliefs and customs from the past taken the place of God, the Living God, who wants you to know Him and hear from Him here and now?

See, if you love God, a “tithe” to the church may be too much. Or it may be not enough. Sharon and I give a tithe to the church from an estimate of our joint pre-tax incomes and from money I have invested. But we also use money “from the other 90%” to support causes like public radio and TV, and a list of other things, too. We also do things to encourage people who need support, and to work for social justice. If God led us to put so much more into other spiritual causes that I could no longer tithe to the church, I would let the church know so they could plan the budget—that’s what the pledge cards are for, to help your leaders plan how we’ll spend your money in the mission year to come. God wants us to give all our lives to Him, but it’s not a law, it’s love.

Starting today, you’ll be hearing a personal story from one or more of our members—a person story about their decisions regarding giving to the church. I just told you mine. On June 15th, we’ll bring in our commitments of finances and commitments of time and talent, and dedicate these decisions to God. We’ll share The Lord’s Supper on that day, to remind us of God’s gift to us.

I hope my work with you today has opened up your minds and hearts to think afresh about your relationship with God. Jesus said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be, also.” Notice the order—feelings follow action. The “treasure” decision comes before the emotional tie. So, perhaps the real question is, how much higher, deeper, and more alive do you want your relationship with God to become in the year ahead? Do you want to stand before God and say, “I wanted to keep running my life on my own, and do what I was told in order to be a good girl, or good boy. I didn’t want You, God, to take too much of my life.” Or, do you want to say, “Lord, I wanted more of You in my life, and I wanted more of my life in You. I wanted to join You in what You were doing, listening to You, giving You 100% of my decisions.”

See, you don’t have to wait until after you die to this life to hear God say, “Well done, good and faithful servant.” You can know God’s pleasure now. You can feel God’s joy as you help make a difference that aligns with God’s values.

And you were afraid this was going to be a sermon about giving to the church!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on May 18, 2008, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]