



Auburn Presbyterian Church

Passionately loving the Lord Jesus Christ and radiating that love to everyone

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

“Trust Deeds” Malachi 3:6-12

As you have heard, we are starting our campaign for financing the mission of the church, calling next Sunday, “Consecration Sunday”. If you’ve been around churches, you know most churches, once a year, build a budget for the year to come, and ask people to give to meet that “dollar amount”. That’s an “institution-oriented” approach, and most all churches ask for support that way—support of the institution’s budget. Most other non-profits do the same.

What we’re doing with Consecration Sunday takes a whole different perspective on our giving decisions. Instead of giving to meet a need, or a worthy cause, Consecration Sunday invites us to make our giving decisions on a different basis: to give the amount that each of us senses God is calling us to give, expressed as a percentage of our income. What proportion of your income is God calling you to give to the church, for the July 1 through June 30 mission year ahead?

I can’t tell you what that amount or percentage will be for you. This morning, I’m going to talk about my thought process on this issue, with the words of the prophet Malachi (some think this is one of the Italians in the Bible—“Mal-AH-chi”) with Malachi’s words ringing in my ears.

Open your Bibles to Malachi, the absolutely last book of the Hebrew Bible, which we call the Old Testament. In Malachi, find chapter 3. I’m going to read verses 6-12, and I invite you to listen with me for God’s Word TO US TODAY. *[text]*

Malachi’s message was delivered about 400-450 B.C., after the Jews had returned from Babylon exile because Cyrus, the Persian general and emperor, had conquered the capital of the Babylonian empire. If you know your Bible history, you’ll remember that Cyrus—in a move no one could have expected, but God’s prophets had announced—not only let the Israelites go home, but restored to them the lavish furnishings of their Temple, and on top of that, gave them a gift to help in the Temple’s rebuilding, and to help put back the city wall around Jerusalem, both destroyed during Babylon’s earlier invasion. You can imagine the excitement about “going home at last” among the Israelites, coming back to their homeland, after almost a generation of cultural oppression in the Babylonian empire. (Read Nehemiah’s book for more on their experience.)

But when they arrived at Jerusalem, they got a terrible shock. How desecrated, decimated and destroyed Jerusalem was! Their elders had bragged about how beautiful and prosperous was Jerusalem and the whole country. But after the war with Babylon, almost anything standing had been leveled. Even farmers’ fields were sown with salt, to prevent raising decent crops ever again. This had been terribly disheartening to the people arriving after their long trip from Babylon, over by the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The work of rebuilding was far harder, tougher, and more expensive than anyone had thought. They were surrounded by hostile

neighbors; the Samaritans in the North opposed them at every turn. And their rebuilt temple and city didn't come close to the glory they had expected to see and had hoped to re-create. And all of this sat on top of the hard work of starting life over in a new place; just feeding one's own family was a struggle. Where was the glory they had been promised, by prophet and clan leader, alike?

Over time, the people's discouragement spread throughout the vulnerable nation's life. Every part of their lives was infected—how they treated each other, and how they treated God. This is the setting into which God sent his messenger, Malachi. In his little book, someone has recorded his messages from God about several key aspects of the people's lives.

Let me sum up that message—at least, the part we read today. “Things are awful for you now, I know,” says the Lord. “But it shouldn't be a mystery why. I'm not coming to your aid, to restore a glory to your lives, because you have walked away from me. Worse, you are robbing me.

“What do you mean, ‘We are robbing you’?” the people asked.

You are cheating on your tithe—the 10% of your income in goods and cash that your ancestors and families promised me in our covenant agreement. Look, I'm serious about this, says God. Go ahead—test me: give your tithe of your crops or livestock or profits, and see if I don't pour out heaven's blessings to you, to make your life terrific. It's what I do, says the Lord. Start with your part.

In other chapters of Malachi, God points to the casual worship customs, and laissez-faire sacrifices people were providing. To me, all of this was a symptom of the people's disappointment—a slow anger and resentment against God had taken root and had become pervasive.

A lot of people today have a “root of bitterness” in them, regarding God. They have suffered major losses in their lives—the death of a child on drugs, the loss of a business after unending toil and hope, the destruction of their home by fire. Instead of letting these losses and disappointments make them better, they let these painful hurts make them bitter. Many of these folks were part of a church years ago, but not since their tragedy. Some are still part of a church, but their bitterness hardened into a “going through the motions”, a “stuckness” that is like a slowly-rotting corpse in the living room. No one—especially no one from the church—has listened to them talk about the stink. Someone needs to visit these people with a good listening ear, and open up a new hope with words like those God told Malachi to speak. That would help the people “get real” with God again, come out of hiding, express their anger and bitterness, and begin to heal. “Get real, begin to heal.”

Now, as for the “tithe”, Christians are not bound by any Old Covenant rule of 10% of our income for the church's work following Jesus, the Head of the Church. We can give as much or as little as we want. We have freedom in this. There is nothing “magical” about the 10% “tithe”. Giving 10% does not get us a better seat in heaven, closer to Jesus. Our salvation is not determined by how much we give.

So why would we think deeply about giving to the work of God through this church? We think about it every year, because it's a powerful way to assess our relationship with God. Jesus

said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also.” (Matthew 6:21, NIV) Notice the order here: the treasure is placed first, and our desires follow where we’ve put our investment.

So, where’s your treasure--literally? For each of us, our checkbook or credit card statement tells what we really value, don’t you think? With that in mind, if you were reading your monthly statement now, what would it show about how large God looms in your life?

And, is that OK with you?

Some of you know God intimately; you have a sense of God speaking to you in any number of ways and occasions. You have a sense of God’s nearness, even in ordinary moments. Thank You, Holy Spirit! You people know the kind of life God calls you to share with Him.

On the other hand, if you live with just “a belief in God”, or a distant “admiration for God”, that’s so sad. If you are “stuck” and “hiding” from God out of bitterness for sour turns in your life, that, too is really sad. You settle for so little, when God wants to give you so much more! You settle for sickness, what God wants to give you health and vitality!

So, how might you change this sad state of affairs?

What would it be like for you to live in love with God? Can you even imagine it?

When I fell in love with Sharon, I wanted to spend lots of time with her (and still do), and it bothers me when “work” gets in the way. I found ways to give her gifts, or little signs of my affection—it didn’t have to be something elaborate or dramatic. (If you ever saw the engagement ring I could afford to give her 36 years ago, you would know what “undramatic” looks like....!)

Living in love with God is a bit like that. You want to spend time with God. You look for God to show up. You hope that as you walk through your day, God might show up and surprise you with delight! You are in awe that Someone so important would want to spend time with you.

OK, so how do you get there, with God? After all, Sharon I can see, but God? Not so much . . . !

Malachi gives us a big hint: act *as if* you and God had this love relationship, and then watch what happens to your feelings toward God.

Pray. Pray *as if* you knew for sure that God was listening, and already was responding (perhaps in surprising ways that you will have to work a bit to notice in the days to come).

Worship. Worship *as if* God were present right here—as an answer to the request we make at the start of every Sunday service together.

Give. Give your money *as if* you were in love with God and wanted nothing more than to be a part of God bringing His Kingdom “on earth as it is in heaven.”

Serve. Serve *as if* you were the very hand and heart of God, making God’s love real to others in this church family and to people beyond us who may not know God at all. Maybe

you'll serve by coming alongside someone who is hurting—as we did so well in The Gathering Inn the previous Friday. Maybe you'll jump in to help a Ministry Team, or help out with a specific project that is on our menu. Maybe you'll serve in the Prayer or Healing ministries, to bring God's presence to hurting people here each month. Our Mission and Ministry Fair follows worship today. Among the displays are people who can answer questions, and you can learn more about our ministries. As you wander through our "Ministry Mall" outside, stop from time to time to sense if there is a "tug" from God about one or another of these opportunities.

OK, that's a lot to think about, so let's focus for these last moments on the part about giving your money *as if* you were in love with God and wanted nothing more than to be part of God bringing His Kingdom.

I like to be part of something important. Do you? Is there anything more important than bringing God's rule alive in our own time? Not if you love God! So "seek first God's Rule and God's righteousness," as Jesus said, "and all the other things you need will be added to you as well." (Matthew 6:33) Did you notice the order here, also?

In a sermon on giving, the pastor of Community Christian Church in Naperville, Illinois, read this letter from Jeff and Julie, who attend the church:

"We moved here for a business opportunity that ended up not working out, and we soon found ourselves in a desperate financial situation. We were behind in our rent and car payments. We had back IRS payments, 16 credit cards with more than \$40,000 in debt, and not enough food in the fridge. On top of all that, we decided to start a business.

"Well, in the middle of this, one of the pastors challenged us to include our finances in our commitment to following Jesus, and I really struggled with this. It wasn't that I didn't want to support (this church) or set an example for others to follow. It was that Julie and I were so broke that on occasion we ended up going to a friend's restaurant to ask for free food.

"I thought, If I'm struggling to keep my family, how can I commit what I don't have to God? What am I supposed to do? Just write a check for 10 percent of my income and hope that something happens? The pastor urged me to trust God and give it a shot.

"After prayer and discussion, we decided that God would get the first portion of every check and not just what we were willing to give up each week. We decided to make God the first priority in our lives, and we had no idea how we'd get by.

"The week after this decision, my brother and I were dropping off flyers at a construction site looking for work. We'd started a carpentry company. We met a builder, and he asked if we would be interested in doing their work. He had a house that was ready for us to start immediately and about 20 more to do during the next 12 months.

"Julie and I no longer questioned how we'd honor our financial commitment. We increased our giving.

"If our story ended there, it would be a good story. However, you cannot out-give God. Over the next couple of years through a divinely orchestrated series of events, Julie and I also went from renters to homeowners. Owning a home has given us the ability to restructure our debt and has also given us some security and stability. I felt the need to tell our story.

"The story is about much, much more than finances. It's about faith, stepping out and trusting God with all that we have-our lives, our future, our relationship, and even our finances.

"Now as I reflect on this story and what we experienced, I'm still trying to answer one question. What was it that we sacrificed?" (Source: Dave Ferguson, Naperville, Illinois)

I cannot say this is a direct guarantee from God to you. I can say that my experience matches this story closely. And I want to tell you that as you live and give *as if* you loved God more than anything, I trust you will experience more love for God, with God.

From faithful actions flow our feelings; behaviors build belief, trust follows deeds. Live *as if* you loved God, and see if you don't discover God showing up in all kinds of occasions, cheering you on, calling you forward, savoring your company in what God is already doing.

Behave it. You'll believe it!

[This sermon preached to the congregation of Auburn Presbyterian Church, Auburn, California on May 31, 2009, by Rev. Kenneth B. Winter.]