

**BLESSED BE THE TITHES THAT BIND**  
**Sermon Series: "Secrets of the Blessed Life"**  
**February 16, 2014 Malachi 3: 5-12**  
**The Church of the Covenant**

A man came in to speak with the pastor and said that he needed to reduce his pledge. The pastor said, "Fine." And then added, "So let's get on our knees and pray to God to see how much the Lord will then reduce your salary in order to fit what you'll give to God." This really is not a sermon on giving, or the church budget, or why people should give more. This is a sermon on the blessed life and one of the greatest secrets related to the blessed life. I have on purpose kept this sermon far away from the stewardship campaign because it is not about fund-raising; it is about spiritual matters and it is about tithing. So there is no benefit to the church or to me personally in relation to this sermon. It is a sermon about you and your blessed-ness. It is a spiritual sermon, not a financial one.

I think my interest in the subject began as a child. I have great parents. I had a chore chart posted on the refrigerator and when I had checked off most of the chores for the week I would receive my allowance. I remember receiving a quarter –big money in those days! But I received it as two dimes and one nickel. And on Saturday night before we went to church and we went to church every Sunday, I would get out my little Sunday School offering envelope and put a dime into the envelope. During opening exercises the next morning before Sunday School I remember everyone parading up to the front and putting their little envelope in the little collection plate. Sometimes I would spend the remaining 15 cents on a popsicle, but most of the time I would save it. My Dad accuses me of having the first dollar I ever made; he is correct. I remember how on your birthday you would get to go forward and put the number of pennies into a tin birthday cake –ka-thunk, ka-thunk, ka-thunk—and the pleasure that it gave me to do that. And I remember One Great Hour of Sharing in the Presbyterian Church where we had those cardboard banks in the shape of a church and how every day I would put a penny into it in Lent. I remember giving being fun not an obligation. I remember being proud that my offering was supporting "our missionaries", the Lorimers, who served in Egypt. I was trained by my church to be generous and I was shown the way of giving by my family. Today, most people think they have the right to spend most of their money on themselves and then give some left over chump change to the Lord; sort of a 1% tip to God when they feel like it and when they have any money left over. But there was a time when generosity and giving was cultivated in the church as a spiritual discipline. My parents and my church taught me one of the secrets of the blessed life.

They were teaching me the principles laid out in scripture like those from the Old Testament prophet Malachi we read today. The prophet links the return of the people to God to the return to the giving of the tithe. *"Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord God of hosts". (Malachi 3: 7)* Our pocketbook may tell us more about where our heart is than what we say with our lips. *"Will man rob God?"*, asks the prophet. (v. 8) *"How do we rob God?"*, we ask. *"In your tithes and offerings."*, answers the prophet. Let me stop at this moment to note that there were three kinds of giving in the Old Testament –the tithe or 10% given to the temple; the offering, which was given to what we would describe as mission; and alms, which was given to the poor, the widow and the orphan. So the tithe was that part of giving that was given directly if you will to God; it was not given to help the poor or other worthwhile projects or entities; the tithe was given to God. And the Lord God concludes this section by saying, *"Put me to the test...if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing...Then all nations will call you blessed..." (Malachi 3: 10-12)* Put me to the test, says the Lord God. Do what I ask you to do and watch how I can and will bless you in your life. I will prove it to you; I will show you how fully capable of blessing you abundantly in your life I AM if you are willing to

trust me. Do what I say and I will shower you with abundant blessings –material and spiritual and every other sort of blessed-ness. See, my beloved, I cannot be preaching to you about the blessed life and conveniently forget what God notes as the source and secret of blessedness –a joyful, willing obedience to what HE asks of us. *“I desire obedience, not sacrifice”*, sayeth the Lord. *“If you love me you will keep my commandments”*, says Jesus. (John 14: 15) I cannot hide this secret of the blessed life from you anymore. I would not love you were I to keep this a secret anymore.

I think my interest in tithing for myself as a spiritual discipline came about from my love for mission. I saw how there was a connection between mission funding and the tithe. Maybe that came from my little Sunday School offering going to support the missionaries in Egypt, maybe it came from seeing what a church can do in mission when people get serious about tithing. By the way, I would rather serve a faithful smaller church filled with more regular people than a large wealthy church filled with very important people. And the reason is that giving comes out of our FAITH and not our resources. A modest middle class church can give more than a big wealthy church when that church gives out of its faith and takes the Bible seriously. So I began as a young minister to develop an idea called “Strive to Tithe”. Its almost impossible to go from not tithing to giving 10% away to the church. So “Strive to Tithe” asked people just to mark off their current percentage of giving in relation to their income. Tithing begins when we start to look at our giving not in dollar terms but in percentage terms. Tithing is extraordinarily egalitarian –the poor person can give more percentage-wise than a rich person and can be more faithful to God than can someone of large means. So I started out and saw that I was giving about 1.5% of my income to the Lord. Not terribly impressive for a pastor I felt. And I purposed to increase that percentage each year –to get to 10% over time. I think the Lord blesses the intentions of our heart as much as the dollars actually given. And I edged upward in my percentage over several years until I finally hit 10%. I was tempted many times to get angry with my churches and reduce my giving; over the years churches have often done things with which I disagree and the temptation is to try to control the situation by reducing one’s pledge. Except, I am not giving to the church; I am giving to the Lord; I am giving what HE asks of me, not what the church asks of me. I’m not giving to a budget; I’m giving to God. I’m giving to honor HIM and believing that HE will bless me with an “overflowing blessing”. I fell off the tithe for a time when I had a very large reverse in my fortunes, but still kept at the principle of striving to tithe and was just about to get to 10% again when I was asked to go to First Presbyterian Church in downtown Pittsburgh and would take a major salary cut, Oh, and by the way I received a notice from Mt Lebanon that my real estate taxes were going up \$900 --\$900 per month! So my income was going way down and my expenses were going way up. Ouch! Another reason why I wanted to move to Washington so desperately! So I prayed about it and I felt God was leading me to give the same amount of money even though my income had declined significantly. I got to 10% when God took away my income! But I want to tell you this –the more I think about it and the more I pray about it, the primary reason why God has brought me here to The Church of the Covenant is to bless me in my life and ministry and I see that moment of seeking to be faithful with my finances as the very moment that God purposed to bring me here. Do we understand that it is not out of our own striving that we are blessed? Rather it is by doing what God says to do that we are blessed. **A secret of the blessed life is a joyful, willing obedience –wanting to do what God wants us to.**

The Session has struggled with this as well. The history here as a church was that we would make a large mission pledge and then when the end of the year came and we didn’t have the money we wouldn’t pay our mission pledge in order to balance the budget. I believe this was the case going back more than a decade prior to my arrival. Now knowing what we know now about the tithe and its connection to the blessing of God, why would we ever suspect that God would bless a church that handled its mission giving that way? It handled its mission giving, what it gave away to God, the way the

world handles its tithing –wait till the end of the year and see and give God what is left over. So about three years ago the Session voted to tithe 10% of its pledges to the Lord. The first year we didn't make it, but please remember that it is the "wanting to do what God wants us to" that is faithfulness. And the next two years were years of financial blessing for the church –the Light the Fire Campaign blessed us I believe because first we chose as a session to tithe. We began a process of making certain that our mission pledge, our tithe as a church, was paid for on a quarterly basis, so we were not tempted to balance the budget anymore through not paying our tithe. So this year there was a temporary disappointment in giving. We had to cut the budget by \$55,000. But the percentage of pledges at 10% still supplied the same sized mission budget. We proposed to the Session reducing the percentage from 10% to 8%. I didn't say anything because I thought I would let the session wrestle with this themselves. I stayed very quiet, especially for me. After some discussion and prayer they said –we think we don't want to reduce the percentage because we think the blessing comes from God. I think that's faithfulness. I believe that the Lord will continue to bless The Church of the Covenant because of many, many faithful decisions, by a faithful, committed and generous congregation to the work of the Lord.

I have found over many years it is best just to do what the Lord says to do. Simple. Direct. To say, "I want to do what the Lord wants me to" is a secret of the blessed life. We don't have to kvetch around about it; we don't have to debate it; we don't have to shake our fist at God about it; we don't have to disagree with it. If the Bible says it, just do it. We just need to purpose within our heart to take the first step. "*Put me to the test*", says the Lord God. See if when you get real about your giving to me if I won't open the windows of heaven and pour down an "*overflowing blessing*".

Why wouldn't I share this secret of the blessed life with the people I love most? And Amen.

*By: The Reverend Dr. Stuart D. Broberg, The Church of the Covenant, Washington, PA  
IF THIS HAS BLESSED YOU, PLEASE PASS IT ALONG TO A FRIEND!*