

## First Fruit Giving

Dear church family, how great it is to gather with you! Welcome especially if you are new or just visiting! So glad to have you here! Don't know your experience with church but this is a hospital. And ever week we are performing heart surgery to get our hearts in alignment with God's. As we start I need to address the elephant in the room. We are about to talk about money. And here's what I know some of you have had really bad experiences - emotional and deep seated with the church and money. For some of you it's the reason you walked away. Some of you debated being here for this series and on this Sunday. Some of you non-planners didn't know until you came, and your heart kind of went aww really. And here's the deal I empathize with your bad church experience and understand what's going on. I get you 'cause I am you.

But we need to talk about money. And here's why. (heart) It's because of your heart, and my heart. Our Savior Jesus made it very clear, "No one can serve two masters. Either you will hate the one and love the other, or you will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and money." (Matthew 6:24) See your heart only has 1 top spot. Not only is that the case but we are among the richest people who have ever lived ever. If you currently make more than \$52,000 you are globally in the top 1% of wage earners. You are the 1%. The affluence of Americans is unsurpassed. And this means we will all be tempted to love money more than God. Not only is this the case. But hanging in the balance is the opportunity to take financial disarray and put it in order. Hanging in the balance is the opportunity not to waste money but to strategically use it all for the glory of God. So we talk about money. Jesus did and we like to talk about what he talked about. *We have to talk about money because our hearts are at stake.*

And to get things going I want to consider this idea. *You can give without loving, but you cannot love without giving.* First you can give without loving. This past week was an opportunity to Trick or Treat. And complete strangers demonstrate they can give without love. Some of them do not love you as evidenced by ways they try to scare your kids. But you don't have to love to give to complete strangers. Here's a Kit Kat even though we have never met. Now granted they are giving poison in the form of sugar or alcohol - never forget a house giving away jello shots.

But *you cannot love without giving.* Men, you find a woman that you love - what do you do? Give. And it's good. Give her flowers, give her food, perfume. Give her a ring that wows her. What about kids. The reason they have so much is because we adore them, maybe too much. In fact perhaps easiest way to assess what you love is to check where your money and time is spent. When's the last time you scrolled through your credit card statement, bank statement? You look and wow. I am in love with coffee, Amazon, woah I really love sports that much for one Blackhawks/Bears game, or another season of sports for the kids and that weekend trip for it. You know what I am love with my house, and my car. Yes you cannot love without giving. What would an inventory of time and money say about your love for God?

So we enter this series called 10 for 10. It's a series with a very practical, very specific challenge. The reason it is called 10 for 10 is because the challenge is this. Give 10% of your income for 10 weeks. That's it - the 10 for 10. As you look at your paychecks finding what 10% is and committing to giving that to the Lord for 10 weeks. And it's not that you're a better Christian if you do, not that your salvation and right standing is based on you doing or not doing this. But there is a great opportunity for blessing and life change.

Because of this I have to tell you I'm actually very excited. Not filled with trepidation, not worried about what you will think though you've been burnt. I'm excited because of the blessings God has for us on the other end. The greatest blessing on the end of this faith challenge is a greater dependence on God and trust in his faithful provision. We have a chance to draw near to him through this challenge and see him answer his promise to bless us. But I'm also excited for the life change God can do. I know financial houses are in disarray - if yours is you are not alone. The average American carries \$38,000 of non-mortgage related debt. And honestly I believe in this so much that I find here a remedy. In 10 for 10 I see God offering a helping hand to put a house in order. From the bottom of my heart I believe God can draw you closer to him, and put a financial house in order by committing to this. I believe in this so much that I proposed to our Leadership that we give a full refund for those who tried it and wanted money back. They rightly thought that was too gimmicky, but I believe in it. I believe in it so much that when I talk to those with financial houses in disarray, my first question is what is your level of generosity. I believe this works.

But don't take my word for it. Take His. Our reading for the day comes from Malachi chapter 3. God could see how people were using the resources he gave them, and he saw they were not responding with their best, with their firstfruits. They were bringing the leftovers and the scraps. But if they change and commit to the tithe God is chomping at the bit to bless them. Chomping at the bit to throw open the gates of heaven and rain down blessing. Let's look there now. Turn to your neighbor. "Let's open the floodgates."

*How much would it take for you to live comfortably?* Have you ever considered a certain number for your salary or for your retirement? I heard recently to retire you need 25x the amount you plan to spend in 1 year. It's an interesting question because I believe in general it always gets the same answer. *More than I have right now.* And there is an interesting phenomenon that takes place. You achieve that salary goal, that savings goal. And you don't actually feel more comfortable. You ever get the promotion you hoped for, that raise, and wonder why it still feels tight? Now one reason is that as our income increases so also the quality of lifestyle increases. More money newer car, bigger house, better food so on and so forth. A couple years back we did a series breathing room where the advice was to create more margin. Don't increase your lifestyle every time you get a pay increase. That's earthly advice to be more comfortable. But actually there is a spiritual dynamic at play.

In the book of Haggai the people of God did not prioritize firstfruit giving. And look at what happened. "You have planted much, but harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." (1:6) You ever been there with grocery shopping - all I bought was coldcuts and bananas. It's how much? Must have been shopping at Whole Foods. You ever felt that way about the paycheck, is there a hole in the my proverbial purse? And the

reason this was happening. The people then were not prioritizing their giving to God. Later it says, "You expected much, but see, it turned out to be little. What you brought home, I blew away. Why?" declares the Lord Almighty. "Because of my house, which remains a ruin, while each of you is busy with your own house." (1:9) They had just come back to Jerusalem, the walls of the city were rebuilt. But the temple of God was in disarray. They established themselves first, without first giving to God. The principle. *Without giving firstfruits to God the more you get, the less you will have.* Less peace. Less joy. Less dependence on God. Less contentment. And even less stuff as earthly treasures are transitory and grow wings and fly away

I remember thinking of this as a church planter. Moved to area and we didn't have a church home or a family home. And I remember reading Haggai. I remember reading this and God through his Spirit asking. Where do you want the better to be - your home or mine? Which comes first? And it's still a fair question. Who's house would you like to see doing better? God's house or yours? To ask it a different way, when is the last time you desired God to receive something better than you receive. When is the last time you planned something incredibly good for his house, in the way you plan for your own.

When the prophet Malachi lived the people were keeping the best of their fields and flocks and bringing the lame and the blemished - offering scraps before the Lord as if he couldn't see. And he said, "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me." "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings." (3:9) The letter of the law has changed in the New Testament, but the heart behind it hasn't. So where is your heart in what you desire for God? Does anyone need surgery? Lord take this heart of stone and make it a heart of flesh.

There's one way for this heart change to happen. It's to peer inside God's heart and be real with what you find there. And do you know what you find. You find a God who gave even though he had reason not to love. Our sins made us his enemies - we were weirder than that house on the block who was kind of mean to your kids. You find a God who loved anyway. He was able to look into each of our lives and say they are worth my giving. And so he gave. Because you cannot love without giving. He has given you life and breath. He has given you the clothes that you wear and the food that you eat. He gave you the house you live in and the car you drive. And he has not been miserly to us, he is the giver of every good and perfect gift. So that giving to God is actually the wrong term. It's returning. But some of you know this. Some of you know it all pales in comparison to the true gift of gold. For his greatest gift was the Son that he gave. The Son who lived, died, and rose for us - to give us priceless treasure. Forgiveness and peace - joy and contentment. The riches money couldn't buy, no only the precious blood of Jesus pays for that. And the conclusion of the matter, "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?" (Ro 8:32) And because this is true. What do you have to lose? The truth is nothing. Even in this challenge you have nothing to lose and everything to gain.

What was firstfruit giving? This is a little dated for us, for many of us are no longer farmers. But it was the idea that the very first part of the crop would be dedicated to God. That if I picked a bag of apples from one of the trees this goes first to God, and not to our house. And here's the deal they didn't know what else was going to happen on the farm. A storm could come in and wipe out the rest of the crop. They didn't know if it was going to be a lean crop or a bumper crop. But they put their treasure where their heart was, and had opportunity for faith.

For us who get a paycheck it is first dedicating 10% to God. Before anything else. And we actually have an app for that. And you don't know what's going to happen next. If the car is going to break down or if you'll have low expenses. But you have the opportunity to trust. *Giving first fruits is a way to trust God's provision more than your plan.*

And what does God say he will do? Malachi 3, "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." (11) And perhaps there are those who have experienced. The fact that you simply cannot outgive the giver. I've seen it in my own life to the degree. And I cannot think of a time where I regretted giving to the Lord. Which is crazy because I've regretted many purchases of toys that broke, and clothes that didn't look as good at home as they did in the store. What's your latest purchase regret? But giving to the Lord I do believe you'll see his provision. *When giving to God first the more you give, the more you will have.* The more in the way of peace, more joy, more contentment. And yes could be just simply he gives you more to manage.

Consider it this way. If you gave a child \$20 to go to the store and pick up items for Thanksgiving - stuffing, milk, cranberry sauce. And he came back with a magazine, candy, and a toy without any of that. Would you send him back with more money to try again? Where as if he faithfully used it to get those items, came back with receipt and all the change. Might you entrust him with more? This is also why it doesn't matter how much money you have right now. If you are unfaithful with a little, you will be unfaithful when more is given. Whereas if you can be trusted with little, God in grace may trust you with more.

I was looking for a story to back this up. I've heard of Christians giving away houses, and giving millions to ministries. I've also heard of how they didn't regret that. I've seen God's blessing in my own life. But I do believe the best story is King David. David got to a place as king living in a new palace of cedar. And it wasn't evil for a king to have this palace. But his desire was for God to have something better. They worshiped God in a tent and his desire was a temple. A temple that would speak of the greatness of God. And this became Solomon's temple an ancient wonder of the world inlaid with gold. Incredible. But what I wanted to highlight is that David couldn't outgive God. Look how God responded to David's heart. He said, "The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you." (2 Sam 7: 11) David you wanted to build me a house, I will establish yours forever. Here God said the Savior Jesus would come through him. Here he found the favor of the Lord and his blessing. The next chapter spoke of the victories of David. Why 'cause he gave 10 for 10 as some formula to coerce God- no 'cause his heart beat for God. And his love was seen in giving.

The greatest blessing hanging on the other end of this challenge is this. I believe those who take the challenge to have feelings or to say, "I finally feel peace over my financial future." "I finally found contentment and realize how much God has given me." "I have so much joy giving back to the one who gave to me." But that's just what God can do in you. Imagine also what he can do through you. *The challenge is primarily about what God can do in you, but also about what God will do through you.*

I was reading an article recently of what would happen if the Christians in church would all tithe. The article recorded the state of things that right now on average only about 10-25% tithe in church. That on average we give 2.5% of what God gave to us. Because of this the

houses of God are in general disarray. As a pastor it's the rare church home fully funded, fully staffed, fully repaired or advancing in ways they could be. And so if all Christians tithed it would be an estimated \$165 billion more for churches to use and distribute. And with that money. – \$15 billion could solve the world's water and sanitation issues, specifically at places in the world where 1 billion people live on less than \$1 per day. – \$1 billion could fully fund all overseas mission work. – \$100 – \$110 billion would still be left over for additional ministry expansion.

I look at the statistics and I hear the voice of Russel Wilson. He is an NFL quarterback who before their team won the Superbowl asked a singular question. Why not us? Why can't we win. Why can't we do it. So I look at this group at Amazing Love and I wonder why couldn't God do a greater work in us. What couldn't we break the mold. Is the Spirit less strong in this place? Do we truly believe God is worthy of lesser glory than in ages past? And what might we do. Make us content yes. Give us joy yes. But also through us we who are zealous for the house of the Lord might see expanded ministry through the calling of a 2nd pastor. Might be able to fully staff and fully fund in a way that is sustainable to reflect an excellent worthy God with excellence. What's stopping you? As we close today we'll have a chance to see a video produced by our synod on this 10 for 10 campaign.