

Hebrews 7:1-28
Matthew 21:33-46

THE SERMON ON THE AMOUNT

One more commitment to consider – the seventh. I hope you have enjoyed this series of sermons. I hope you will enjoy today's. But some of you will not, unless you relax. Some people see commitment only as pain – obligation laid on from outside – instead of as vision and opportunity for a better life. Nobody is trying to *make* you do something you do not want to do. Nobody is trying to *make* you pray every day if you would rather stay distant and estranged from God. It would do little good, if that were the basis. Can you imagine the content and quality of prayer time, if a person were resentful and angry about having to pray?

Just so, what spiritual advantage could there possibly be in tithes or offerings given grudgingly or from an unwilling heart? But let us be clear: The concepts of tithings and offerings to God go back as far as we can trace human history. What was the problem between Cain and Abel? Abel brought the choicest of the firstborn of his flock as a gift to God; Cain could not stand it, so he killed Abel. He thought Abel was too self-righteous. He thought that Abel was either trying to make him look bad or was doing it to get in good with God. It was all a figment of Cain's imagination, however. Abel loved God and merely wanted to show it. But it made Cain insanely jealous, and the problem has plagued us ever since. Cain decided that it was easier to kill Abel – to do away with the example that was making him look bad – than it was to check his own heart and motives ... and, God forbid, to repent. It is reminiscent of what would later happen to Jesus. And we have had that same problem ever since.

Some people are always trying to denigrate the principle of tithing or pretend it does not really matter, but it is a fool's errand. The stories of Abraham and Jacob cannot be ducked. The pattern of Israel's life was shaped around sacrifice, first fruits, firstborn, and tithes. One entire tribe among the twelve was set apart to take care of the Tent of Meeting and the feasts and sacrifices – to care for the holy things – so God would remain central to Jewish life. Why does it take ten families to form a synagogue? Because if they tithe, they can hire a rabbi. I think it was reduced from twelve to make it easier to

form synagogues. But tithes from twelve families would leave enough to start saving up for scrolls and the other needs of a synagogue community.

The Bible is replete with stories of falling away from commitment, and of returning to faithful patterns. Over and over, God gets neglected and things go from bad to worse. Often there is also renewal – great joy as the community returns, rededicates itself, decides to take God seriously once again.

The seventh commitment is the commitment to TITHE – to give ten percent of your income to your church. (More of that definition in a moment.) Now, why wouldn't you relax as we talk about such a beautiful concept?

If you tithe already, you rejoice in the principle. And maybe remember your own struggles with the concept, and smile as you recall what happened when you finally made the commitment. But if you do not already tithe, then every word I utter is potentially difficult. That is, you must ward it off. You must find some way to conclude that I am telling it wrong. In your mind, you must either discredit me or go into poverty. That is what some of you still think, consciously or subconsciously. And if I am at all persuasive – if I say anything that appeals to you in any way – then that is threatening. Even if you are able to make it through the sermon genuinely convinced that I am in error, it leaves a residue of resentment that I troubled you with the notion of tithing in the first place. You managed to escape my clutches, but if you were not so smart and fast in your wits, I would have left you with a whole new load of guilt. That is how some of you think – or will end up thinking, if you do not shake it off on purpose. Only, I am not poisoning your mind – the culture around you is doing that. You want to love God, and you want to show it. Tithing is a privilege and a joy. It is natural to want to bring gifts to our God, and to want our Lord's influence and reputation to prosper and spread upon the earth. The truth is, we have to warp things and go grim inside, to keep ourselves from responding to such a principle.

In any case, you can relax. You know very well that I cannot *make* you do anything you don't want to do. Maybe you don't realize it, but I do not *want* you to do anything you don't genuinely want to do. You think I want to be minister of a bunch of guilt-ridden, resentful, hostile people? That might sound like fun to you, but not to me. "Tried it once, didn't like it." Besides, our God is not like that. Our

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God is dangerous, but he's not stupid. Our God calls us to incredible LIFE, but we are never supposed to respond until we would rather risk the consequences than miss the adventure. So relax. If you want, you can even assume I'm going to tell you a bunch of bunk. But it will be interesting. A lot more interesting than some other things you spend your time thinking about.

Here we go. First of all, let's be clear about tithing. This is "The Sermon on the Amount." The amount is ten percent of your spendable income. If you accept the seventh commitment, you figure out how much money you make, and then ten cents on every dollar of that goes to your church. This is really clear and simple to most of us, but genuinely confusing to some. Let's slow down. I cannot clear up details, but I can clear the principle. By the way, checking it out with your Mentor is an excellent idea. That way you know pretty clearly if you are rationalizing or if you are really trying to honor the principle.

Money that you make – that is available for you to spend for any purpose – that is what you tithe on. Every tither has to work through the wrinkles of their own situation. Every tither does it prayerfully. Classic situations: (1) You earn money that goes into a retirement fund or into Social Security. In many cases, your employer sends money you are earning straight to those places. You do not tithe on that money. You have not received it yet. If the day comes when you start getting checks from such sources, then you tithe on it. It has become income. (2) Suppose your employer pays your health insurance. You tithe on that amount. It is working for you in the present, buying protection. If you do not think the protection is important, do not buy it.

Let's not get snowed under with details here. We all have to work out the details until we think it is a tithe, and until we are pretty sure *God* knows it is a tithe. Just getting the concept clear. You may also have some favorite charities, but take such gifts out of your own money, not God's. A tither is someone who gives one-tenth of their spendable income to *their church*. You get to choose your church. That was not always true in the past.

What is "the church"? The church is the covenant community of believers in Jesus Christ that you participate in. Its function is to increase faith on earth, to strengthen awareness of God's Kingdom, and to invite people into a fellowship that tries to walk and live for that Kingdom. Perhaps you give a lot of money to a lot of various

charities; that makes you generous, but it does not make you a tither. I am just trying to be clear. A tithe is ten percent of your spendable income, given to the church to which you belong.

You see, there are many good causes upon the earth. That is part of our problem. Priorities constantly trouble us. One of the deepest meanings of the seventh commitment is that it names and sets the church of Jesus Christ as a top priority in our lives.

That is what truly is at issue. Do we or do we not truly believe that Jesus is the light of our lives? Do we or do we not want His mission and movement to increase upon the earth? If you do not pay tribute to your King, you do not *have* a King. Christians, like their Jewish forerunners, have always known that God is the true King. That is often muted upon the earth – often neglected or forgotten. But Christians have always known that what is most important here is usually not what is being called important here. The true and most important citizenship is citizenship in Christ’s Kingdom. We tithe to the church because that is our true allegiance. And when we can no longer live in this world in allegiance to our true King, then we will no longer live in this world. No hard feelings.

The church in our time gives very mixed messages about allegiance. The church is very important, but not *as* important as soccer or Monday Night Football or a thousand other things. In former times, people sacrificed jobs, mates, homes, friends, health – life itself, when it became necessary – in order to keep their allegiance to Jesus Christ. What are we to make of it if the people of the church in our time believe that it is too much to ask if God inconveniences us? How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much?

Money is an item of interest – and more than that, an *issue* – for almost every human being on earth. For many people, down through the ages, money has been of interest because it can be used for religious aims and purposes. But where is the line between greed and devotion? Between responsibility and pride? Between stewardship and stinginess? Humankind has stumbled, and sometimes broken, over such issues from the dawn of time. Socrates proclaimed: “If a rich man is proud of his wealth, he should not be praised until it is known how he employs it.”

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This is “The Sermon on the Amount.” I get to cut through the confusion and tell you that a tithe is ten percent of your useable income. God does not want you poor. Ninety percent is for you to use faithfully in your own life. Ten percent is for the church, which represents the Kingdom here on earth. You get to hear this message once again and decide whether or not you will live by it. Isn’t that clear and simple? It should also be a delight! “We make a living by what we get, but we make a life by what we give.” Or so said Winston Churchill. Which reminds me of a story:

It is told of a British family that journeyed to Scotland for a vacation. The young son went wandering through the woods by himself and came upon a swimming hole. It was a hot day, so he stripped and dove in. But the water was far colder than he had expected, and soon he was doubled up with cramps. Unable to swim ashore, he yelled and flailed and was about to go under ... when suddenly he felt strong arms reach around him and haul him to the side of the quarry. It was a Scottish farm boy who, working in a field nearby, had heard the yells and dashed over to dive in and pull the English boy to safety.

Next day, the English boy’s father sought out the Scottish farmhand and, with deep emotion, thanked him for saving his son’s life. He asked the Scottish lad what plans he had for his own life. “I suppose I’ll be a farmer like my father,” the boy replied. “Is there anything else you would rather do?” asked the English father. “Well, secretly I’ve always wanted to be a doctor,” said the boy, “but we are common folk and my parents could never afford such schooling.” “It would please me to help with your dream,” said the Englishman. And he pledged to pay the boy’s way through medical school.

Years later, in 1943, Prime Minister Winston Churchill was in North Africa, dangerously ill with pneumonia. Sir Alexander Fleming was summoned to fly down with a new wonder drug he had developed called penicillin. Fleming administered the new drug, and Winston Churchill made a remarkable recovery. Thus the Scottish farm boy saved the English lad a second time.

Churchill’s father, in gratitude, had given Fleming the astounding gift of a medical school education – thinking it was a “thank you,” and perhaps a reward, for saving his son’s life. But in fact he was saving his own son’s life at a later time – in a future he could not yet

see. Of course, he was also saving many other lives in the process. Do we really imagine that if we tithe to God, we are rewarding *God*? Or do we recognize that we are saving our own lives, and the lives of those we love, a second time ... a third ... a fourth?

Jacob, fleeing from Esau and seeking a wife, headed north to Haran (Turkey). There, he had a strange, mystic encounter. And there, he made the seventh commitment – to tithe. This encounter changed his life. He had been a mama’s boy, a cheat, a liar, a thief. Genuine changes are hard and take years, but they have to start somewhere. Like Jean Valjean in *Les Miserables*, Jacob stole a blessing and found out that the blessing was really stealing him. His life was being transformed.

Among other things, I am reminding you that tithing is not *my* concept. I preach it to stay faithful. Over and over, I have trembled when certain parishioners decided to tithe. I was afraid it would ruin them. I thought the discipline was too much for their circumstances. Yet over and over, some unseen things would connect and, instead of ruin, the blessing would flow and life would take off. And I have just stood there gaping. Life likes to be dedicated to the true King. Things straighten out that nobody even knows are out of alignment or not integrated. When all the particles of the magnet face in the same direction, the power is surprising. I guess it is not really a miracle; it just seems like one.

How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much? What would the church be like, do you suppose, if all or most of its members tithed? Obviously the financial resources would greatly increase. We would have three or four times as much money to be faithful with. Do you think God would like that? Instead of squabbling over every line item or arguing over which of our most basic programs deserve to take the cut – instead of feeling stingy, acting poverty-stricken, or wondering if we can afford a projector or our staff or a refrigerator for the parsonage – we would be trying to figure out the next most joyful and faithful step to take. If you all suddenly tithed, we would be trying to figure out what to do, as a congregation of faithful stewards, with an \$800,000 overage – and I mean *after* already fully funding our requested budget – and we would be facing that problem every year. In time, that would change who we were,

what we were able to accomplish, and how we felt about the church. Do you think God would like that?

Be that as it may, this I can promise you: We will never be the church we want to be – and, more importantly, we will never be the church the Holy Spirit wants us to be – unless we become a tithing church ... and a church of tithers. Jesus and His church have to become that important to us, that high on our priority list. And no, it is not just the money. It would change how we felt about coming here, how excited we were about what we do here, how we felt about each other – everything. Do you think God would like that? How much can God ask of you before you decide it is too much? As usual, and of course, pleasing God benefits us far more than we can ever imagine.

That brings us to what tithing is really about. It is not a scheme to make money. It is not about raising a budget. It is a spiritual discipline. Its purpose is to bring us closer to God. While it does benefit the church if members become tithers, the benefit that matters most is the benefit to the tither. Tithing clarifies priorities, and it announces a clear and genuine allegiance deep within. Tithing changes the level of our relationship with God; it changes the nature of our participation in the church; it changes the experience of what it means to walk the Christian Path or Way. To be very clear: The true reason and purpose of tithing is for the spiritual growth it brings. Otherwise, it would have no place among the basic commitments of the Christian Life.

I do not believe that any person is ever able to make the commitment to tithe simply because they think the church needs money. There has to be more smoke than that to cause a fire. Motive has to match commitment. The discipline of tithing is much too great to be fueled by mere economics. The only people I have ever known who tithed were people who came to see it as part of the spiritual Path – part of the Christian Way. It is an allegiance thing: A way we pay tribute to our King. A way we keep saying, in all our labors each day of our lives, “Lord, whatever I do, whatever I’m about, one-tenth will always be for You, because I love You.” That is very close to what Jacob said, after his experience with what we call “Jacob’s ladder.”

Here are a few quick items, none of them fully explained:

1.) If you decide to tithe, then claim freedom from guilt. It does not matter how much you make. A tithe is a tithe. Isn't that beautiful? If God does not think it is enough, let him increase your income. You do your part, and God does his part. When you tithe, you have a right to be peaceful and content with what you have given – no matter who asks what or thinks otherwise. Many people are able, and choose, to give to various things beyond the tithe. Well and good. Free choice – no obligation. If you tithe and wish to do more for your church, it should be in the form of a special, designated gift of some kind. I realize this is not a great concern to most of you. But never give more than ten percent of your income as a regular pledge to the operating budget of the church. It will mess things up in the long run.

2.) I do not know why the following is true. It makes no earthly sense to me. I only mention it as an item of interest, and perhaps someone here will bring me information to the contrary. There seems to be an operative principle that kicks in when we give ten percent that does not work at six percent or eight percent or anywhere short of the ten percent. I only report that many people over the years have told me that it changes at ten percent – that the blessing, though perhaps it was *trying* to operate, was quite muted until they reached the ten percent. You can do with that whatever you like. I'm not trying to argue you into anything; I'm just telling you what I know.

3.) I am often amused that the church never preaches about “blessed are the poor” on Stewardship Sunday. If you are going to tithe, then the richer you are, the better I like it. I wonder if God feels that way. “The more you tithe, the more I can bless you, and the more we can accomplish together.” Have you pondered the parable of the pounds lately? (Luke 19:11-26) Those of you who are pragmatic realists would probably want to make clear to God that there is incentive for blessing you – that if you do well, his church is going to benefit. If you are competing for a promotion and the record of performance is just about equal but you tithe and the other person does not, whose side is God going to be on? God gets ten percent one way and nothing the other way? Well, everybody knows, or thinks they know, that God is no good at business affairs. I am sure there is no truth to such an implied favoritism. But are *you* sure?

4.) Okay, I was having fun. Now I am in dead earnest. Some of you might accuse me of trying to use reverse psychology. I do not think you are foolish enough to be moved by silly tricks; do not think I am stupid enough to try them. Please listen and hear this: It is important not to tithe before it is time. The one arena of life where we can never cheat or take shortcuts is in spiritual affairs. Faking faith does not work. When it comes to money, giving money on the Christian Path is an act of praise and devotion. Any other motive makes it counterfeit money. God is not a beggar. The issue here is not about God's needs. It is about our awareness of God's presence and God's Kingdom, and our desire for fullness of LIFE in Christ Jesus.

Some people think they can bring any old gift they want, whenever they want, and the poor old doting Creator of the Universe will feel lucky and grateful to get it. All spiritual people have always known two things: First, that you never appear before God empty-handed. Sometimes we can only bring remorse or a broken heart. But we never come with nothing to lay before him. (Exodus 23:15) The second thing we have always known is that the gift must be pure or true or right in some way, or God will not accept it. (Remember Cain? Remember the lamb without blemish?)

Giving to God must be in praise and devotion. The gift must be "without blemish" – without ulterior motive, insincerity, or resentment. Christians must be very thoughtful and prayerful about what they bring to God's altar. Oh, I don't mean God will break out and smite you. The gift will simply be rejected. Nothing that matters will come of it. You will go home unblessed. And the church will wither and go dry. Does that ever happen? All across the land.

If you do not know what your gift should be, better to give nothing. If you resent the giving, far better to give nothing. God is patient. God will honor your honest intent to find clarity and authenticity. The Board of Trustees may be less enthusiastic – but then, who do you want to please, them or God?

I realize that if all of you, or even most of you, started to tithe, it would have a dramatic impact on our church's budget. We could do many things we are not now able to do. We could take on new projects, expand present programs, even take on new missions. It will cross your mind that I would like you to tithe so this could happen. Let me tell you something: I would *love* to see this happen! There

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probably is nothing in this world that seems more exciting to me than the possibility of living in a church that really means to live its faith.

That is still not why I preach this sermon. First and foremost, I care about your spiritual health and growth. I know the interior difference – the difference in a person’s personal relationship to their Lord – when they do not carry their commitment and devotion to the level of tithing. *That* is what I care about.

If you do not pay tribute, you have not yet claimed Jesus as YOUR KING. If you have a King you believe in, it is joy to pay tribute. Friends, *that* is what tithing is really about. Life is like a game of chess. Every move you make reflects the position of your King. What is the position of Jesus Christ in your heart and life?