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**Weekend of Sunday, November 11, 2018**  
**25<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Pentecost/Lectionary 32/Proper 27/Year B**  
**Primary Text: Mark 9:38-50**  
**Sermon Title: “*Reflecting God’s Goodness with our Treasure*”**

## **Theme**

*After engaging in a series of public arguments with religious leaders in the temple, Jesus contrasts the proud and oppressive ways of those leaders with the sacrificial humility and poverty of the widow.*

## **Text**

<sup>38</sup>As [Jesus] taught, he said, “Beware of the scribes, who like to walk around in long robes, and to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces, <sup>39</sup>and to have the best seats in the synagogues and places of honor at banquets! <sup>40</sup>They devour widows’ houses and for the sake of appearance say long prayers. They will receive the greater condemnation.”

<sup>41</sup>He sat down opposite the treasury, and watched the crowd putting money into the treasury. Many rich people put in large sums. <sup>42</sup>A poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which are worth a penny. <sup>43</sup>Then he called his disciples and said to them, “Truly I tell you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the treasury. <sup>44</sup>For all of them have contributed out of their abundance; but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on.”

## Sermon

Years ago, in my ministry as an ordained pastor of the church, I made a conscious decision to separate the process of drafting a budget from the process of reminding the membership of our responsibility to participate financially in the life of the church. I still think it is a great decision, and I am happy to tell you that that is exactly how we manage our financial affairs here at Zion too. In years gone by, what most churches did and what many still do, is the local church would draft a budget with a meager increase and then ask the church to step up to the challenge and usually the church would do that.

The problem with that plan is that many members who want to be faithful and obedient limited their offering to what they felt the church was asking for and that is wrong. The church doesn't "ask for an offering" – it "receives an offering" as the church responds to God's blessings upon them and is inspired by the Gospel to be faithful to our Lord's call to discipleship. In other words, when we are faithful and obedient, we are "Reflecting God's Goodness."

Today we conclude the three-part Annual Stewardship Campaign, that I entitled, "Reflecting God's Goodness." Over the last two weeks we focused on the first two of the three aspects of personal stewardship; Time and Talent. In today's exciting conclusion we will examine the third aspect; Treasure, and to do that I want to teach you about the biblical concepts of tithes and offerings. Yes, they are separate and different and almost all of you participate this way, even if you don't realize it.

**Proverbs 3:9-10** Honor the LORD with your substance  
and with the first fruits of all your produce;  
<sup>10</sup>then your barns will be filled with plenty,  
and your vats will be bursting with wine.

Technically speaking, tithing is giving one tenth of your first fruits to the work of the local church. The work of the church being those Seven Faith Practices we studied a few weeks ago. What a tithe meant in biblical times was one tenth of one's livelihood. They didn't have a cash economy so that often meant a tenth of the produce from a harvest or from the herd or flock, or however one made a living.

The meaning of *first fruits* meant that the ten percent was to be given first. And it was always the best. One could not say, “It’s time to go to the Temple and make sacrifice. I’ll take that old dried up milk cow.” No, scripture is clear, the animal chosen for sacrifice had to be perfect and without blemish. And why is that? I am so glad you asked. This command forced people to realize that their success was not based on their great agricultural skills, but on God’s goodness. So when one gives their best, they are trusting God with their success.

Personal stewardship has little to do with paying the churches bills – that’s why we separate stewardship from budget drafting. Personal stewardship is a spiritual issue. When you get your paycheck and then look at the pile of bills that you have amassed, you are facing a spiritual dilemma. And this dilemma Jesus spoke to quite specifically:

**Matthew 6:24 (NRSV)**

**<sup>24</sup> “No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other, or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.**

And I know the questions you ask yourself; I pay the bills in my household. “Am I going to have enough?” “If something has to be skipped or put off or not paid off entirely, what will that be?” And sadly, I suspect, because church members feel little sense of accountability to the church, the church can be passed over easily. Let’s face it, no one will come after you, the church can be a thing that is skipped, or put off thinking we will catch up next week – and then next week we face the same decisions all over again. Here is my suggestion, why not give tithing a chance, a full ten percent before taxes tithe, and see if God doesn’t bless you for it. If it doesn’t work for you and your family, you can always back off.

Every year we have families who respond generously to the stewardship campaign with the best of intentions only to fall short. I don’t tell you that so that you intentionally commit to less or not at all. I simply hold poor personal stewardship up as an example of our sinfulness.

Look at this scripture again: Jesus isn’t wrong – but what happens if you don’t pay your cable, telephone, electric and gas bill etc. etc. etc.? You lose those things don’t you? They’ll shut you off! So you pay those first and if there is anything left

you will consider making an offering to the church. If I have described you and your family, then I can tell you, you have a spiritual problem, just like Jesus said. You love your stuff and your lifestyle more than you love the Lord.

Now I am not opposed to treating yourself well, but as the people of God who always struggle to be faithful and obedient, we need to keep it in perspective; keep first things first. Let me be clear about this; look at the scripture verse again and ask yourself who is first in your life. Jesus teaches it is to be God alone. Is God first in your life? Does your personal stewardship bear witness to that?

The devil knows the insidious nature of our economy; *buy now pay later* plays right into his plan to divert us and our resources from God and God's ongoing work to redeem the world.

Using myself as an example, I use a free automatic bill pay system provided at no charge by my bank to make our contributions so our tithes and offerings will come regularly even on those rare weekends when we aren't present. Zion provides two electronic giving options; the website and the phone app. Each and every week the Jesses' make a contribution of more than a *tithe* to the church, and this year we will add a monthly *offering* to the building fund even though we were not involved in the decision to build or expand this big beautiful building years ago.

Those opportunities to give extra cash above and beyond our tithe, is called an *offering*. We provide many opportunities for you to give an offering to special causes each month in the boxed sets of envelopes and I try to remind you of it in the announcements. We make those special offering opportunities available to you because we know you want to be faithful and obedient and do godly good with your personal finances, and we also know you are smart enough to figure out which of those causes are worthy of your offering. But please do not take from your tithe to support another cause regardless of how worthy it is. The church needs your consistent tithe to plan and continue its operation.

I have heard that some people really like the spirituality of writing the check to the church. If writing a check each week is a spiritual exercise for you, more power to you. It doesn't matter how your tithe and offering is made, what is important is your faithfulness and obedience in reflecting God's goodness for all that God has done for you.

But here is the point I am trying to make, when you make your contribution to the church, the first check of the pay period, you ought to make it a first fruits tithe. When you do that you are saying,

*“God, everything I have belongs to you; my time, my talents, and my treasures. You could demand all of it from me and what choice would I have. I thank you for allowing me, trusting me to steward for you what you have first given me. In thankfulness I give back just a portion of it and I pray that somehow you will be blessed by my faithfulness and obedience. It’s not all about me – it’s all about you. Thanks for being so generous to me.”*

If you are a first fruits tither – a full one-tenth, before taxes contributor – you have my personal thanks. If you are not, I want to encourage you to consider trying it. It’s not as if I have many conversations about personal stewardship, but I have had several conversations with people who tithe and they feel great about it. Don’t get me wrong, giving all you have could never be enough to repay God revealed in Jesus Christ for all he has done for you on the cross, but I know for me, there is a sense of satisfaction in knowing that at least in this one area of my life, I am faithful and obedient to God.

If you aren’t currently a tither but want to do better with your personal stewardship allow me to suggest incremental increases in your commitment in your budget. Incremental changes – a percent taken from the budget and given to your commitment to the church will over time get you to a full tithe within a few years painlessly. If you need some other suggestions see me and let’s see if together we can’t make some headway toward faithfulness and obedience.

Several years ago the whole stewardship campaign was based on the prophecy of Malachi. You might recall that the Lord God begs his people to put him to the test when it comes to personal stewardship. God said:

**Malachi 3:10-11 (NRSV)**

**<sup>10</sup> Bring the full tithe into the storehouse ... and thus put me to the test. See if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.**

Finally, let me close with this simple thought. Tithing helps us put God first, for as Jesus said,

**Matthew 6:21 (NRSV)**

**<sup>21</sup> Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.**

Because tithing requires us to think about and plan how we will use and dispense the gifts God has entrusted to us, it teaches us reverence for God, helping us to love and trust God above all else. And when we honor God with our whole and holy lives we are blessing to God.

### **Raisin' the Bar Challenge**

Now, as I told you last week, we have a problem. Because of a tight schedule, we had to get the commitment cards out to you so you could get them back to us. So I will not be surprised if you have it with you tonight/today. That is what we asked of you. The problem is that I hope I have given you cause to re-think your commitment and you wish you could re-do it. Do that, if you need to. And if you don't have it with you, please get it back to the church as soon as you can. But as you consider, or reconsider, your commitment, put God to the test as God himself challenged in the prophecy of Malachi. Do what God commands, and be that reflection of God's goodness.

### **Prayer**

Lord God, giver of every breath of life and every good thing, it is that time of year again when we are forced to examine this most sensitive part of our spirituality – our personal stewardship. I pray that your Holy Spirit will be at work in our minds and in our conversations this week as we begin to think about how we bless you for all the blessings you give us. This we pray in the name of the crucified and resurrected one, JC our Lord. Amen