

## **Will God Pass the Test?**

**Malachi 3:8-12**

Two thousand people were gathered before us. It was the annual Church Mission Rally in Newport Beach, California. The event had been wonderfully challenging and enlightening that whole day. Now all were together to “wrap up” the experience in a grand celebration of worship and Eucharist. The singing had been ecstatic, the praying had been powerful, and the preaching had been heart grabbing for everyone to this moment; except for me.

I had a front row seat. Actually, I sat “up front” in the midst of the huge massed choir, cloaked in one of my congregation’s choir robes...anonymous! That had been my role and my desire that day; to stay an unnoticed part of the crowd. To everyone there I succeeded well in that intent. To everyone there...except one! God took notice of me.

This may sound strange, especially for a priest to say, but I wasn’t particularly desirous of being noticed by The Lord that day. I had been feeling rather “dried up” recently. No Psalmist’s flowing streams of mercy, nor green pastures of grace were in my inward parts. Oh, I wasn’t Death Valley inside either; just a browning lawn in a Central California heat wave. It’s not that I was happy about how I was doing spiritually. I just didn’t want to be disturbed about it. So, I had been quietly enjoying being hidden to that moment.

It was not to stay that way. God had decided to disturb my complacent soul. The words of the sermon kept attacking my sense of comfort. God would not let them fade from my consciousness. “Bring the full tithe into my house...put me to the test, and see if I will not open up the windows of Heaven for you...”

I did not want to think about these words. They burned my already parched soul like a hot wind passing over dry grass. Yet, I knew that I could not resist their truth. I knew from past experience that I wouldn't be able to turn a deaf ear to the Spirit's steady rapping at the door of my mind and heart for long.

How long had it been? When was it that I had stopped tithing? I remembered that I had started tithing in High School. My pastor in those days had preached a very straightforward sermon on Malachi 3, and had not minced words. The Biblical model for giving was "first fruits," and tithing, he had said. First fruits meant giving to God before all else. It was to come off the top of the paycheck before anything else was paid. "First fruits" was to be an act of faith that said that we trusted God for the rest of our needs. The tithe was to be the goal of our first fruits. We were to dedicate ourselves to eventually giving the 10% of our income "off the top" as God blessed us with income. "It's not that God needs your money," my pastor explained. "It's that you need to give it for your own sake. Giving money to God, in our money-centered culture, is a true reflection of giving your whole self to God, and keeping money from becoming your God instead."

Most of my home church congregation responded. People began to give according to what they actually received. The professionals in our midst began to give as they prospered with clients. The farmers would give as the harvest came in. Some of them went so far as to invite gleaners into their fields to take a portion of the crop to feed the hungry. The salaried members gave according to their pay checks, and the laborers gave according to their hours; including overtime. As for me, I had an after-school job that paid me a whopping \$100 a month. Ten dollars doesn't look like much in retrospect, but just then it was a lot to me. I started to tithe.

Throughout college and grad school/seminary I continued. In college, when jobs changed almost as often as semester classes, I would write on my annual church pledge card, “10% of anything I get!” At one point, while working as a waiter in a restaurant, I pledged to give as my tips rose or fell. Somehow, my giving only seemed to increase. God’s promise to faithfully open the windows of Heaven in blessing was proving true at every turn. That blessing was not foremost an economic one, though that was part of it. Primarily, I was continually growing in my sense of God’s presence and guiding hand upon my whole life. I knew that money was just one aspect of my life, but tithing, for me, symbolized the giving of every aspect of my life to God. As a result, God had taken a very personal hand in the whole of my life. His bounty of guidance and meaning was going far beyond anything that extra 10% could have even begun to buy.

As D’aun and I settled into our first parish together, we remained tithers. Now, tithing meant that we could really give back to God’s work something significant and steady. The windows of Heaven continued to pour out one blessing after another.

Somehow, somewhere, though, even while the giving increased on our part, the tithing began to slip. As my salary went up, that 10% was starting to look awfully big. An increasing family meant increasing financial responsibilities calling out to be met, and I wasn’t sure that I could afford to “just give away” all that much anymore.

“How strange,” I thought as I sat in that Mission Rally choir loft. “When I had less, I was more faithful.” Despite my faithlessness, God had remained faithful to me. I still had prospered economically; more importantly, I had prospered in spiritual growth, in personal relationships, and in a rich home life. The windows of Heaven were still wide open. Yet, there was a disquieted dryness in my spirit.

The preacher announced an altar call. Those who would rededicate themselves to God were called to come forward. Hundreds of people rose, filling the aisles full and swelling the numbers kneeling at the front chancel steps. God had called, and they were responding. God had noticed me, too. The complacency in my soul was gone. The dryness within was now provoking a raging thirst; a raging thirst for God. Nothing less than to go forward would do.

After a few agonized moments of debate within, (“I can just talk to God from my seat. I don’t really need to go forward. What will my parishioners think if they spot me?”), I found myself traversing the chancel to arrive on my knees at the chancel steps. There I made my commitment to return to a Biblical standard of giving. “Lord,” I prayed, “I will give you the first fruits starting today. And, I commit myself to become a tither again.”

D’aun and I began right away to give the first fruits of my income. Over the next few years we slowly became tithers again, adding a percentage increase every year until we got there. It wasn’t easy. It never is! Those were hard economic times. But, honestly, do we ever have truly easy economic times? I wish I could say that every economic problem miraculously disappeared since then. But, that would not be true. And, as you can now tell, this is not a Prosperity Gospel sermon. Nor would it be entirely helpful if it were true. God wants us to give as an act that builds our faith, expresses our love, and puts our monthly needs in perspective; not for economic gain. Yet, D’aun and I have come to see God’s provision at work for our family’s needs. Even more, though, spiritual revival has become the norm, even in the face of economic setbacks, and deep, emotional loss. Our sense of the Lord’s presence has only become stronger, our trust in Him more sure, and our prayers have become more confident even as they have become more daring. God has been faithful.

So, God, in the words of the prophet Malachi, challenges you and me to put him to the test. “Bring the full tithe into the temple...and see if I will not open the windows of Heaven for you in overflowing blessing.” Yes, my sisters and brothers, it’s stewardship season. Will God pass this test? Step out in faith. Become a “first fruits” giver. Make tithing your goal. God will open the windows of Heaven for you in blessings.