

Sermon #226
Malachi 3:6-12
November 12, 2017

Open the Floodgates of Heaven!

It was just a small, crumpled envelope. The man with the scraggly beard and tattered jeans thrust the paltry envelope into my hand. “Here,” he said, “take this. This church has given me so much and I want to give back. I know it’s not much, but I want to help the church that has given so much to me.” I told him, “Thank you,” and he left with a slight smile on his face. Later I checked the envelope to see a few crinkly dollars and then made sure I put it in the offering plate the next day. It was a gift of gratitude.

A few years before that a needy man attended our pancake breakfast on the Day of Caring. He talked with our young people serving the meal and they encouraged him to stay. He did so and enjoyed the pancakes. He then donated one dollar to the cause. One young person said, “That’s all right, you don’t have to give toward this. It’s for you.” “No,” he said. “I want to give. It’s a worthy cause.” It was probably all he had, but he gave it all out of gratitude. Another gift of gratitude.

Another man came to our church near the same time with a bag of clothes that his daughter had used. He said that he had been to our food pantry several times and had noticed that we also give away clothes. So, he said, “You have given to me, now I want to give back.” Once again, a gift of gratitude.

Have you ever given a gift to anyone just out of sheer gratitude for what they have given you? Yes, I’m sure you have, and so have I. During this season of thanksgiving and this sermon series on gratitude, we are reminded of what God has already done for us. There is so much to be thankful for. In Psalm 103, that Mike read earlier, the Psalmist began by praising God for the good things he had done.

“Bless the Lord, O my soul,” he began. “And all that is within me, bless his holy name. Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget all his benefits – who forgives all your iniquity, who heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the Pit, who crowns you with steadfast love and mercy, who satisfies you with good as long as you live so that your youth is renewed like the eagle’s” (vv. 1-5).

That’s a great God. That’s a God who loves to give good gifts to his people – to forgive them, to heal them, to redeem them, and to crown them with love and mercy. In Malachi 3, the other passage we read this morning, God tells his people of his goodness. He tells them that he wants to “throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.” Now that’s a great blessing! But there was only one problem. God’s people weren’t in position to receive it. Gratitude was not part of their disposition. In fact, their hearts were far from God. God’s people were in desperate need of repentance.

1. Gracious people learn to repent of their sin

The prophet Malachi prophesied sometime about 400 years before the coming of Christ. His was the last OT revelation before the coming of Christ and God's silence of 400 years. He ministered to the people of Israel some 40 to 50 years after they had returned from exile in Babylon, after Nehemiah and Ezra helped the people rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and the temple. God's people had been restored to him during Nehemiah's time, but now they have faltered once again. They broke his covenant like their ancestors had done.

The people had been unfaithful to their married partners and divorce was rampant. They had married foreign wives who had led them to worship idols, just as God had warned them not to do. They began practicing sorcery and divination. They lied and defrauded the workers of their wages, and they oppressed the widows and the fatherless. And most of all, the priests, who were supposed to lead the people in righteousness, had become the most corrupt.

Thus, God said to them, *“the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi,’ says the Lord Almighty” (2:7, 8).*

God's people have rebelled and have broken his covenant, especially the priests (2:7-16; 3:5-7). God calls his people to return to him through his messenger and through his refining process (3:1-4). If they return to him, he will return to them (3:7). That's when God brings up one more thing they've been forgetting to do. God tells them they've been withholding their tithes and offerings, and in that way, they were robbing God and putting themselves and their whole nation under a curse. But that's not what gracious people do.

2. Gracious people bring the whole tithe into his storehouse (v. 10).

In verse 10 God's commands his people, *“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,’ says the Lord Almighty.”* Notice the emphasis on whole. It's not just a part, but the whole, that God is concerned about. A tithe is a tenth of all that we earn or receive from God. It all belongs to God anyways. All he asks for is a tenth, and that was the command and the practice of the OT. Bringing it into the storehouse meant the temple area. Then there would be enough resources for all.

Now in the past few years, we have encouraged people who weren't giving a tithe of their income to God to begin with 2% and move up from there with 2% more each year. About 11 households last year indicated that they would take that step. So again, this year we encourage you to keep moving up another 2% if you haven't reached the 10% yet. The goal is to eventually get there. Because God says, *“Bring*

the whole tithe.” And gracious people, who recognize God’s blessings, are more than willing to give at least 10% and sometimes more. Gracious people are not self-centered. They realize that the generous life begins with God, in fact, it is not about them at all.

A mother wanted to teach her daughter about giving. She gave the little girl a quarter and a dollar for church, and said, "Put whichever one you want in the collection plate and keep the other for yourself." When they were coming out of church, the mother asked her daughter which amount she had given. "Well," said the little girl, "I was going to give the dollar, but just before the collection the man in the pulpit said that we should all be cheerful givers. I knew I'd be a lot more cheerful if I gave the quarter, so I did."

I think the little girl had a lot more to learn about being a gracious giver, no? It's more like J. D. Rockefeller who learned to be a gracious giver even when his salary was meager, as he said, "I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 a week."

God says, bring the whole tithe into my house and gracious people are more than glad to do so, because they respond to God’s blessing, knowing that they could never give more than what God already gives.

3. Gracious people respond to God's blessing

God says, "Test me." Just try me. Do we trust him enough to really put him first with the money and resources he has given us? That's a problem for many North American Christians, because most studies show that only about 1 to 2% actually tithe. We seem to have a problem in trusting God. That's a spiritual issue. Maybe part of it has to do with bad eye site; we can't see his blessings. We need 20/20 vision in order to really trust God with the money he has given us. Listen to what God promises his people, if they will only trust him with their tithe.

“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’ (v. 10).

God wants to bless his faithful people by pouring out his blessings on them from the floodgates of heaven. Notice the active verbs here. God will “throw open the floodgates” and he will “pour out so much blessing.” “Throw open” and “pour out” indicate rich blessings. For an agricultural community that would have meant much rain for a more than abundant harvest. He would also keep them from the pests that devour their crops, and the vines in their fields would not drop their fruit before they were ripe. Then all the nations will also see God’s blessings and call them blessed (v. 10-12).

There's a story about a ninety-year-old man who was planting a peach tree one day. A friend walked up to him and asked, "What kind of tree is that?" "Why, that's a

peach tree,” the man replied. “I love to eat peaches.” His friend said, “You’re a fool. You’ll never live to see that tree bear fruit. What do you think you’re doing? The man replied, “Somebody planted peach trees, and I love peaches. I’ve been eating peaches all my years because somebody planted peach trees. And so, I am planting this peach tree for somebody else to enjoy the fruit of this tree in the future.” The old man had received much and was ready to give much for the future.

Much has been given to us. What are we planting for the future?

If you are a member, this week you received in the mail, a gratitude card that looks like this (hold it up). If you didn’t get one or would like one, there are more on the welcome table in the back. You can hold up your hand and the ushers can get one to you. This is a simple way to express your gratitude to God for all that he has done for you and for the ministry of our church. This is a simple commitment between you and God to do your part in bringing the whole tithe into his storehouse, his temple. You can make the pledge in increments, per week, month, or year. And you can let us know, if you want to, that you are participating in the 2% increase challenge. Then next week, during our gratitude service, we will bring our gratitude cards back and place them on the altar during the service. It’s also our special Sunday to be back in the new, remodeled sanctuary. There is certainly much to be grateful for.

Conclusion

Many people have given gifts of gratitude no matter how big or small, because of what God and this church have already done for them. Oh, Belmont UMC, God wants to bless us abundantly and he already is doing so. He was willing to bless a rebellious, covenant-breaking people in the past, and how much more will he bless us if we remain faithful to him today? It’s time to put God to the test, as he asks. Will we really trust him? He has already given so much to us, especially through the ministry of this church. Let’s be gracious people in response. Are you ready for God to open up the floodgates of heaven?