

Sermon—November 19, 2017

God's Arithmetic

Matthew 25:14-30

Malachi 3:10-4:2a, 5-6

Last week, you received pledge cards asking that you let our vestry know what your intentions for church giving will be in this coming year. Instead of outlining your church's budgetary plans for 2018, I would like to emphasize some biblical themes as we prayerfully ponder our financial and ministerial commitments to God for this coming year. Today's Gospel stresses the importance of investing our talents as two of the three servants were commended by their master for 100% multiplication of their talents while the third servant lost the one talent entrusted to him because he chose to hide it rather than put it to work.

Usually we interpret the Parable of the Talents as speaking about ministerial gifts, but it also refers to finances. God multiplies what we offer in faith for His use.

Conversely, we lose what we don't use.

Today I would like to focus on three biblical truths concerning our financial giving.

First, God who owns everything is our only source of what we have. Thus First Chronicles 29:14 reminds us that "All things come of thee, O Lord, and of thine own have we given thee."

The second biblical truth is that God wants us to apply the Golden Rule in using what is His in this world. Thus Matthew 7:12 records Jesus concluding His Sermon on the Mount with these words. "So whatever you wish that men would do to you, do so to them."

Finally, there is a third biblical truth.

God miraculously multiplies what we give back to Him for His use. Thus Paul writes in his Second Epistle to the Corinthians (9:10) “He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources.”

Let’s look at these three truths and see God’s arithmetic in action.

How is God, who owns everything, our only source of what we have? “ALL things come of thee O Lord and of thine own have we given thee.” Have we ever comprehended these words from First Chronicles which we often repeat during the Offertory portion of the service? We act as though all things come from whoever supplies our incomes—our jobs, our investments, Social Security, even relatives and friends. Yet they don’t create what we have. Only God creates wealth. We simply transfer what God has already created from one recipient to another.

St. Paul knew that God was his only source all too well as he wrote to the Philippians (4:9).

“But my God shall supply ALL your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus.

Do we truly believe these words? Matthew 6:33 records Jesus telling us not to be anxious about what we eat and drink, but seek first His Kingdom and His righteousness and all these things would be added as well.

Instead of worrying about whether the American economy will satisfy your needs and wants in the coming year, ask how you can obey God in the use of your finances. God may ask you to invest in His work in unexpected, faith-stretching ways. The point is that it is wise to invest where the wealth originates. It all comes from God, so the return on your investment is a sure thing.

When you prayerfully decide on your pledge, don't make the motive for your gift center on anything in this creation—including this church's needs.

Concentrate instead on pleasing God because He is the only source who can guarantee you a return on your investment. Anything less than God falls short of that objective. God WILL supply ALL your needs!

How does God do this?

God follows what we have come to know as the Golden Rule—the second biblical truth we are citing today. God didn't just give us this rule. He follows it Himself. How?

God follows the Golden Rule by giving to us BEFORE we give to Him. The Golden Rule stresses the necessity of taking the initiative to give before receiving anything. For example, God gave us our lives before we gave anything back to Him in material gifts.

In the person of Jesus, God died on the cross for our sins even before we were aware of the depth of our sinfulness. Thus God gave us forgiveness before we gave Him repentance. Jesus said from the cross, “Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.”(Luke 23:34)

The greatest example of God’s application of the Golden Rule is the fact recorded in Genesis 1:27 that God made us in His image. God wanted us to act and be like Him. He wanted us to do what He does. God wanted us to be willing to do to Him as we would wish Him to do to us. That’s the Golden Rule. How do we do this in a tangible way?

One way is to follow God’s arithmetic by managing the wealth He has given for our use. Following the scriptural truth of the Golden Rule, we are urged in scripture after scripture (36 to be exact) to tithe unto God one tenth of all that he has given to us.

The basic intent of the Golden Rule seems to underscore most of the passages on tithing in the Old Testament.

The common theme seems to be—do to God as you would like Him to do to you. People were called to tithe first with the expectation of them being blessed by God.

For instance, Abram's tithe to Melchizedek in Genesis 14 is followed by God's promise in Genesis 15 that Abram would father many children even though he was past the age of fathering children.

Another example of God's blessings following tithing is found in Deuteronomy 14:22-29 which spells out the procedure of bringing tithes to the place of worship. The tithe is seen there as a spiritual act designed to deepen the people's trusting relationship with God. This section of Deuteronomy (14:29) ends with a promise of God's blessing.

“Do this (bring your tithes first), and the Lord God will bless you in everything you do.”

Remember that Jesus Himself saw giving as a spiritual act when He said, “Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Matthew 6:21)

Finally, there is that well-known passage in Malachi 3:10.

“Bring the full tithes into the storehouse that there may be food in my house, and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

These three passages illustrate an application of the Golden Rule when we give tithes to God. If we desire blessings of God, **FIRST** give to Him and His work. Do unto God as you would have Him do unto you.

As we study the Old Testament, we become aware that as the story progressed, most people lost this vision of God blessing them in response to their gifts to Him. More and more, they became apathetic about tithing. They began to see tithing as a debt they owed to God rather than a seed sown for His blessing. Their unpaid debt had grown so large that most people gave up paying it.

This was the situation when the prophecy of Malachi was proclaimed at the end of the Old Testament. Thus Malachi (3:14) laments to the people, “You have said, ‘it is vain to serve God.’” To the people of Malachi’s day, God’s laws seemed onerous—too heavy to bear. Thus the Bible says in Malachi 3:9 that they were “robbing God” of the tithes due to Him.

In this sad state of affairs, Malachi sought to restore the original vision of the tithe as a seed of God’s blessing.

First, plant the tithe as a seed (Do to God) and then you would be blessed (As you would have Him do to you).

Unfortunately, the people didn't listen to Malachi and the people's physical and spiritual condition continued to deteriorate for the next 400 years. Their debt of unfulfilled obligations to God was overwhelming.

Who could pay the staggering debt accumulated by the people's refusal to obey God's laws—including not paying their tithes? Those who did pay their tithes—the Pharisees—were so legalistic about it that they only saw it as a debt to be paid rather than a seed to be sown for God's blessing. The only times Jesus mentions the tithe is to illustrate the legalistic spirit of these Pharisees. Matthew 23:23 records Jesus crying out, "Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees. Hypocrites!"

For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice, mercy, and faith.

These you ought to have done, WITHOUT NEGLECTING THE OTHERS.” (Jesus Himself affirmed the importance of not neglecting the tithe.)

In the Parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector (Luke 18:12), Jesus pictures the Pharisee bragging, “I fast twice in the week. I give tithes of all I get.” Thus Jesus stresses that we should not be prideful in doing what God asks of us.

These are the only references by Jesus to the tithe in all of the gospels. That leads to the logical question, “What did Jesus do to the law of tithing?”

The people’s none-payment of the tithe reflects an overall distrust in God providing for them. This unbelief was part of an overall crushing debt of sin on the people which could only be settled in one way—by the Son of God going to the cross.

The cross applied God's arithmetic by activating the promise of Philippians 4:19.

“And my God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

God satisfied this debt by using His “riches in glory”, that is, the perfect faith and love of His Son Jesus Christ. Jesus paid the ultimate price of His life in perfect faith and love which motivated Him to go to the cross. Jesus did it on our behalf so that our debt to God caused by our falling short of His law's expectations was fully paid.

By dying on the cross, Jesus put giving on a whole new basis. With the giving of His life, Jesus, as the Seed of David, sowed a seed which would bear fruit in the resurrection community over which death would have no further authority. By practicing the Golden Rule, Jesus brought golden results.

He gave His human life first to God and received a resurrection blessing unprecedented in history. It is that quality of life which Jesus shares with us today.

What does all this have to do with our giving money? With Jesus fulfilling the Old Testament law of tithing by paying the full price of our failure on the cross, it takes away from us the dread of paying tithes out of guilt and obligation—a feeling like I owe it to God. There is no joy in that kind of giving.

Jesus' death and resurrection brought to us the New Covenant. Under the New Covenant, the whole basis of giving has changed. Second Corinthians 9:6-8 gives us a picture of what giving is like under the New Covenant. Paul writes,

“The point is this: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Everyone must do as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to supply you with every blessing in abundance so that you may always have enough of everything and may provide in abundance for every good work.”

Paul is leading us to look at the third scriptural truth of God’s arithmetic. God miraculously multiplies what we give back for His use. This is not a cheap “prosperity gospel”, but a fundamental illustration of how God operates His universe.

This scriptural truth was in effect at the cross as the single life of Jesus was offered to meet the demands of God’s law concerning sin. It was costly, but Jesus paid the price. The miraculous effects of Jesus offering His life on the cross has been miraculously multiplied billions of times through redeemed human lives. Jesus redeemed your life and mine from the hopelessness of sin and death.

We have been given the way to freedom from permanent death and Jesus is that way!

How do we walk in that way—especially in the area of giving? St. Luke records Jesus telling us to “give and it will be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over will be put into your lap.” (Luke 6:38)

So many of us have been raised with the idea that when we give, we are not to expect anything back. We were led to believe that it would be selfish to expect something in return—especially if it is more than we give. It **WOULD** be selfish to expect the one to whom we are giving (whether it would be an individual or a church) to pay us back whether it be in dollars or praise. That would be living by human arithmetic or calculation. However, it perfectly accords with God’s will to see our giving to God as seed which will multiply according to God’s universal law of seedtime and harvest.

Genesis 8:22 says, “While the earth remains, seedtime and harvest...shall not cease.”

Just as a farmer expects a harvest in accord with God’s natural law, we can expect a harvest from what we give to God. That’s not selfish. That’s illustrating God’s law of seedtime and harvest.

Using the imagery of seedtime and harvest, Paul expresses God’s arithmetic in Second Corinthians 9:10-11 when he writes,

“He who supplies seed for the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your resources and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way for great generosity which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.”

As long as we remember that God is the provider from whom all things come; as long as we practice the Golden Rule to render to God what we would like Him to render to us; as long as we have the farmer’s faith to expect God to multiply the seed gifts we return to Him; we are living by God’s

arithmetic. Giving becomes a joy rather than a dreary obligation. When we get to this point, there is nothing to prevent us from moving beyond tithing to new levels of joyful giving experience.

Please understand how God's arithmetic works. Its purpose is not to make us get rich quick. Its purpose is to show us a walk in FAITH which enables us to more clearly see God in our daily lives. Our legitimate needs will be met—many times in delightful unexpected ways. Money will no longer be a focus of worry binding us to this world, but a means of expressing our bond and trust in our Heavenly Father. We'll really get to know God intimately—sharing His joy just as the servants who risked and multiplied the master's talents in today's Gospel shared their master's joy. (Matthew 25:14-30)

Let us prayerfully decide what to pledge not on the basis of the Church's needs. We all love St. Dunstan's Church, but Jesus calls us to love God even more.

Let us pledge our tithes and offerings because it enables us to discover the joy of living by God's arithmetic—acknowledging God as the only source of the things we use; obeying His Golden Rule in the managing of these things; and discovering with awe and wonder the miracles of multiplication already built into God's creation.

Catch this vision. Its importance goes far beyond this moment of stewardship emphasis.

It has the capacity of guiding your whole life toward a deeper knowledge and love of Jesus--and that's what the Christian life is all about.