

# Testing God

Malachi 3:10

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Malachi 3:10

**Bring the full tithe 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 for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need (Malachi 3:10).**

## Testing God

Putting God to the test can be tricky business. When the devil tempted Jesus to jump off a cliff to see if God would save Him, that was bad (Luke 4:12; Matthew 4:7). When the Israelites grumbled in the wilderness, that was bad (Hebrews 3:8, 9). A testing that is capricious or driven by doubt, selfishness (as with word/faith charlatans and many televangelists who treat God as a vending machine), or presumption is dangerous and unhealthy (at some level this is true in our relationships with each other).

But there is also a good testing. It is more akin to trusting. Very seldom do we see people called to test God. The above passage is one of those rare instances. It's as if God knows that tithing is a challenging call. We feel as if it is beyond our boundaries. If we tithe, we won't make it. God is calling us to trust Him. There are benefits to tithing (again, don't think vending machine).

Economics may not top our list of spiritual priorities. But the Bible does have something to say about it. And we should seek a wise, biblical disposition toward our finances. A great deal of our spiritual makeup can be relegated to the world of mist and ambiguity. We comfort ourselves that God knows our hearts and we are walking faithfully by some undefined metric. But our finances are objective. It's math. It's measurable. And, as we shall see, we (as a nation) are objectively pretty pathetic. This may explain some of our other problems.

## Part of Worship

Every Sunday a part of the liturgy is tithes and offerings (Numbers 18:26-28; Deuteronomy 12:6; 1 Corinthians 16:1, 2; 2 Corinthians 9:12). It is listed among the deeds of worship:

**There you shall take your burnt offerings, your sacrifices, your tithes, the heave offerings of your hand, your vowed offerings, your freewill offerings, and the firstborn of your herds and flocks (Deuteronomy 12:6).**

Similar to any other portion of worship, we should seek to develop a proper engagement in our tithes and offerings.

## Weakness in the Modern Church

I don't know who gives what in our church (intentionally, so as not to have a hint of bias in my message and priorities). But in terms of national statistics, tithing (if it can even be called that) is continually hitting new lows<sup>1</sup> when compared to earlier decades in America. Recent statistics indicate that Protestants give 2.38 percent of their income (hence, not tithing, since tithe means tenth). Only five percent of America's churchgoers actually tithe.<sup>2</sup>

As I said, I don't know if this is true of our particular church. But since it is clearly a national trend, it makes sense to address it. If I knew (which, at some level I do) that there was national trend against being a loving church, or a praying church, or an evangelistic church, or a biblical church, or in any other way not a faithful church, that would be worthy of a message. Since there is clearly a national trend against being a tithing church, it is worthy of a message.

## Our Current Status

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.christianpost.com/news/tithing-hits-record-low-churches-spend-more-to-make-congregants-happy-58237/>

<sup>2</sup> [https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/church-giving-statistics-tithing#:~:text=Tithing%20Statistics,-5%25%20of%20churchgoers&text=Out%20of%20the%20247%20million,year%20\(Health%20Research%20Funding\).](https://www.vancopayments.com/egiving/church-giving-statistics-tithing#:~:text=Tithing%20Statistics,-5%25%20of%20churchgoers&text=Out%20of%20the%20247%20million,year%20(Health%20Research%20Funding).)

Add to this, the session has asked me to preach on tithing because our trustees/budget committee has reported that we are well behind our projections. It's at this point that the sermon (or the church service in general) can take on the feel of a business meeting. And though I'll try to avoid that, a great deal can be learned about a person (including our own selves) when you take a close look at what you're spending your money on.

The ability of our church to pursue certain types of ministries is, at some level, dependent upon our budget. But I am not approaching this in some sort of desperation. I am under the conviction that churches, in general, should function (financially) within the boundaries of their means and faithfulness of their members. If we, as a church, are faithful in our giving, good! We need to form a budget which reflects that.

Let us here not underestimate the hearts of our committees who handle the budget. They know this is hard-earned money. They know it has been given for the advancement of the kingdom. They know it must be handled responsibly. These are all very biblical convictions.

The major question before us is, what is the standard (if there is one) by which faithful giving is to be determined? Has God determined, with any specificity, what He requires for the functioning of His church? Here is how I will approach the matter: 1. God has determined that a tithe (tenth) is the appropriate amount for the running of ministry. 2. The tithe is primarily to be used for ministerial staff. 3. An offering is different than a tithe. 4. How do we get there?

## **Tithing**

For various reasons you will hear a great deal of pushback against tithing. I heard a minister one time say that no matter what you give, make sure it's not a tithe. Make it nine percent or eleven percent, but not a tithe. If you give a tithe (according to his theology) you're putting yourself under the law. This was wrong at so many levels, I cannot begin to address it in full. Enough to make three observations. Tithing was before the law was given to Moses. It was clearly in the law given to Moses. And it continues in the New Covenant (after the law-if it can be put that way).

## **Before the Law**

Long before the law was given to Moses, we see an interaction between Abraham and Melchizedek which included a tithe.

**And blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand." And he gave him a tenth of all" (Genesis 14:20).**

We see tithing again, prior to the law, with Jacob.

**And this stone which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house, and of all that You give me I will surely give a tenth to You (Genesis 28:22).**

### **Tithing in the Law**

All to say that tithing was not merely part of the Mosaic administration. Yet, it was clearly in the law given to Moses.

**Thus *all the tithe* of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S; it is holy to the LORD (Leviticus 27:30).**

That tithing is in the law is so beyond dispute, that I won't linger in that argument. See also Numbers 18:21-24; Deuteronomy 14:22, 23; 2 Chronicles 31:4-6; Nehemiah 10:37, 38, etc.

### **Tithing After the Law**

But what about now, the New Covenant? Has tithing, like animal sacrifice, become outdated and unnecessary? Has God introduced some new criteria? Before I merely answer 'no' to those questions, let's examine why we would answer in the negative.

There is an implied continuity between the Old Testament (Covenant) and the New. Only God can make a law (in the absolute sense) and only God can repeal a law. And God did not repeal the laws in the Old Covenant willy-nilly (without reason). Old Testament ceremonial laws

were repealed because they were designed to teach us about the Christ. When Jesus came, those laws were no longer necessary.

Also, some of those laws (e.g., fabric and dietary laws) were designed to insulate Israel from other nations. But the New Covenant is international, so the national distinctions were no longer necessary. Consequently, we will see the abrogation of certain laws when we begin to read the New Testament.

For example, in Mark 7 we read of Jesus repealing an Old Testament law.

**Are you so dull?" he asked. "Don't you see that nothing that enters a man from the outside can make him 'unclean'? <sup>19</sup> For it doesn't go into his heart but into his stomach, and then out of his body." (In saying this, Jesus declared all foods "clean.") (Mark 7:18, 19).**

Peter learned a similar lesson in Acts 10:15.

Even though the New Covenant had not yet fully blossomed (not until after the ascension and closing of the NT canon), Jesus took the opportunity to teach the Christian faith with its New Covenant features. Notice, however, that He does not do this with tithing. In fact, He does just the opposite.

**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 and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others (Matthew 23:23).**

This would have been a perfect opportunity to (as He did with dietary laws) abrogate the tithe. But He does not. The words, "**These you ought to have done**" reinforces the instruction to tithe.

An even stronger argument is found in the writings of Paul where he uses the Old Covenant tithe as a model for New Covenant giving.

**Don't you know that those who work in the temple get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share**

**in what is offered on the altar? <sup>14</sup> *In the same way, the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should receive their living from the gospel*” (1 Corinthians 9:13, 14).**

Notice in verse 14 the use of the phrase, **“in the same way”** *houtos kai*. One must ask in the same way as what? The seemingly obvious answer is the same way as those who work in the temple. And it is beyond debate that those who worked in the temple were subsidized by a tithe.

Before we move on, Let’s also address the objection many offer that the Old Testament required more than a tenth (there were essential three tithes). In some respects, the tithing was a form of taxation by which the society itself was run. It was more like 23% (Leviticus 27:30–33; Nu 18:26–28 a second tenth [Deuteronomy 12:18] every third year [Deuteronomy 14:28, 29]).

If we were to discuss the amount of giving that should be used to run a society, we would address that issue. But we’re not discussing the running of a society but of the church – or in the Old Covenant, the priesthood. So we will stick to the tithe of which Abraham, Malachi, Jesus, Paul and the author of Hebrews, etc., speaks.

## **Ministerial Staff**

This brings us to our second point, which I will address briefly. The tithe is primarily to be used for ministerial staff. There may be all sorts of costs that a ministry will incur (buildings, books, utilities, travel, microphones, etc.) but the primary emphasis in Scripture is the funding of the minister.

In the context of funding the pastor (not muzzling the ox), Paul makes the argument that the **“laborer is worthy of his wages” (1 Timothy 5:17)**. We can also conclude that the laboring in **“preaching and teaching” (1 Timothy 5:17)** is a full-time job, demanding some level of excellence. As we saw, Paul compares those who **“preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:14)** with those Old Covenant priests who **“serve at the altar” (1 Corinthians 9:13)**. Of those priests it is written:

**For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts (Malachi 2:7).**

Of this verse, J.A. Thompson writes:

**The freedom to study “the Law of the Lord” was not a matter of academic leisure for the priests; rather, it was crucial for the well-being of the whole nation that the clergy thoroughly understand what God requires (cf. Mal 2:6–7). Similarly, any church today that does not afford its pastor the opportunity for study and growth will suffer for it.<sup>3</sup>**

I recall being in a theological discussion with a fellow pastor when a member of his staff interrupted us with a mild chastisement for wasting our time talking about doctrine when there were more important things for us to attend to as pastors. I have found this to be a common, contemporary disposition. It is not one to which we should cater. How contrary to Scripture!

**Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine (1 Timothy 5:17).**

The need to be immersed in the study of God’s word is why you will often see, with the calling of a minister, the promise of the congregation to free the minister “from worldly care and employment.” Perhaps it is our lack of willingness to recognize this that the office of minister has fallen into disrepute.

Names of Americans distinguished in Medicine, Law, and Theology are inscribed in the ceiling vault of the Library of Congress in Washington D.C. We wouldn’t hire a part-time lawyer or doctor unless the situation was dire. Neither should we have part-time pastors.

When I consider the calling and requirements of the post I hold, I must admit I find it humbling and a bit overwhelming. And well should I.

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<sup>3</sup> Thompson, J. A. (2001). *Vol. 9: 1, 2 Chronicles* (electronic ed.). Logos Library System; The New American Commentary (358). Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers.



For humility and dependence upon God should ever attend the hearts of those who hold this office. What I should not do is lower the bar that I might find comfort in mediocrity.

## **Tithe Versus Offering**

Thirdly, we see the distinction between a tithe and an offering. This is true in both the Old and New Covenants. In the Old we read,

**And they received from Moses all the contribution that the people of Israel had brought for doing the work on the sanctuary. They still kept bringing him freewill offerings every morning (Exodus 36:3).**

When we were discussing the tithe, we read Paul's approach in 1 Corinthians 9. In the midst of his explanation, he appeals to the law.

**Do I say these things as a *mere* man? Or does not the law say the same also? <sup>9</sup> For it is written in the law of Moses, "*You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain*" (1 Corinthians 9:8, 9).**

But notice how he seems to say just the opposite when he is writing of the offering to be given, not to the pastor, but for the support of the Judean saints outside of their own church. Paul writes,

**I speak not by commandment, but I am testing the sincerity of your love by the diligence of others (2 Corinthians 8:8).**

It is in the context of the offering, and not the tithe, that we read the oft quoted,

***So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver (2 Corinthians 9:7).***

The tithe is objective (10%). The offering is more subjective (what you have purposed in your heart). It might be important to note that “**purpose[d]**” does not mean being impulsive or thoughtless. The Greek word actually means to decide beforehand. This is not an appeal for irresponsible giving but thoughtful generosity.

All to say, there is a difference between a tithe and an offering. An offering can go many places (for the printing of Bibles, missionary support, relief work, etc.). The focus of the tithe is the ministry (ministers) of a given church.

### **How Do We Get There?**

Driving down the street one day, I realized that I had forgotten my wallet which holds my driver’s license. Since it is the law to have a driver’s license and since Christians are called to obey the law, I was not where I should have been. I was in violation. However, it would have not been very prudent of me to stop my car in the middle of the freeway and walk home (since this would be jaywalking).

What was required was a well thought out plan to correct the problem. There are many people in the church who have so extended themselves that the idea of tithing is unthinkable. This is not where we, as Christians, should be. We need to plan in such a way as to correct the problem. Here are some suggestions:

Make a target budget and include the tithe. Work toward that budget responsibly. Examine your records at the end of the year to see if you’re in fact tithing. Bring all your finances under the prayerful responsible, prudent care of the Lord. Don’t give under compulsion, guilt or any other ungodly and manipulative impulse. Search the scriptures and be faithful to be a doer of the word and not merely a hearer.

### **Conclusion**

Of course, no amount of tithing can make a person right with God. It is not as if we can make God our debtor (Romans 4:4). We should approach tithing, as with any act of obedience on our part, in the light of the Gospel—in the light of what Christ has done for us. As Paul writes.

**For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though He was rich, yet for your sakes He became poor, that you through His poverty might become rich (2 Corinthians 8:9).**

## Questions for Study

1. In what respects is testing God good or bad (page 2)?
2. What is a tithe and how is the modern church doing when it comes to tithing? Why do you suppose that is (page 3)?
3. Is tithing still required in the New Covenant church? Explain (pages 4-7)?
4. Where should the finances of the tithe be directed (pages 7, 8)?
5. How is a tithe different than an offering (pages 9, 10)?
6. How do we get to the place where we can responsibly tithe (page 10)?
7. Does tithing make a person right with God (page 10)?