

*“I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.<sup>7</sup> Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.*

*“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’*

*<sup>8</sup> “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.*

*“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’*

*“In tithes and offerings.<sup>9</sup> You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me.<sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 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 you will not have room enough for it.<sup>11</sup> I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the LORD Almighty.<sup>12</sup> “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:6-12 NIV 1984)*

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*“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’*

*<sup>8</sup> “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.*

*“But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’*

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## Do We Trust God?

The Christian life is all about trusting God. For example, some people might say that cheating on your wife could be a lot of fun, as long as she doesn't find out. And even if she does, it might be worth it. But Christian husbands trust God when he says that we'll be better off if we are faithful to her. So we never find out what the “fun” is really like. Likewise, we Christians trust God when he says that this is the best way to spend our Sunday mornings. So we're not out fishing with our kids right now. We're not sleeping in or reading the paper or biking on Hines Park – even though all those things sound fun. The Christian life is living the way God tells us to because we trust him. And stewardship is really just applying that principle to the gifts God gives us – our time on this planet, our talents and our wealth. Last week, we made you aware of serious financial issues that face our congregation. Today, we're hoping all of you will stay after church to discuss those issues. But before we talk together, we each need to stop and evaluate the state of our hearts. **Do we trust God?**

### I.

**Do we trust his unchanging love?** God laid that question before his Israel through the prophet Malachi. He said, **“I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”** Malachi was the last prophet that God sent during the Old Testament period. For over a thousand years, the people had rebelled and turned away from God again and again. Half their country was destroyed by the Assyrians. The other half went into exile in Babylon for seventy years. Malachi wrote a hundred years after they had come home. And nothing had changed. The people still didn't listen to God. They still didn't trust his love enough to believe that if they lived as he called them to, they would be better off. So, God told them that the only reason they still existed was that he had made promises to love and forgive them.

Then he told them, **“Return to me, and I will return to you.”** But what was their response? “Return to you how?” They couldn't even see what was wrong. So God spelled it out for them. He told them to bring a

full tithe and a complete offering to the Lord. In the Old Testament God commanded that every believer should bring ten percent of all their income to the LORD, right off the top. They weren't allowed to feed their families and pay their bills and put a little away for retirement and then figure out what they were going to give the LORD. God commanded them to give him ten percent and then with the 90 that was left, they did all those other things. When they failed to do that, they were robbing God. That's the word he used. But they figured they worked hard for their money. Who was the prophet to tell them they had to give up ten percent right off the top? They were too selfish to give God what was rightfully his.

Do we rob God? Some churches demand that their members bring in proof of their income so that they can bill them for ten percent. We don't do that. I will never ask to see your tax forms or your pay stub. There's good reason for that: God did not command us to give ten percent in the New Testament. What God commands us is harder: to be generous. But God never tells us what he considers to be generous. Instead, he lets us reflect on how much faith we have and how much wealth he has given us and he tells us to give back as he has blessed us.

Do we do that? Some people don't even think about their offering until the collection plate gets to their pew and then they dig through their wallet looking for the smallest bill they have. Is that generosity? Certainly, a generous offering is different for different people. If you make minimum wage, ten percent might be an enormous offering to you. But if you make a couple of hundred grand a year, you might spend more than ten percent on cars and toys. The percentage will change as God has blessed you.

But God does call us to be generous. And if we aren't, we're robbing God. Only you can evaluate your giving and I don't want to guilt anyone into giving more. Your giving is supposed to be a free gift. But God has called us to support his work. What does that mean, practically speaking? What does our congregation spend its money on? The biggest area is salaries and benefits. You pay me and six teachers and a secretary. You're responsible for our retirement benefits and health care, for some us. This is the biggest category because the ministry is a people business and it takes people to do the work. The next category is buildings and maintenance – our mortgage and upkeep on an aging physical plant. The third category is operating expenses – the lights, school supplies, books, mailings, whatever. And the fourth category is support for the work outside our congregation. That would be HVL and our synod mission offering, among other things.

That's the ministry we have. Because it's the largest category, let's talk about salaries. Many of you have taken salary cuts over the last five years. Few have had pay increases. That's a valid point. There's an old saying that applies here. As your pastor, I will eat bread with you. In other words, if this is all God has given us, then I ask nothing more than to live at the same level you live at. I and the other called workers will eat bread with you if none of us can afford hamburgers, to say nothing of steak. But I will not eat bread for you. It's sin for us to require our called workers to accept a standard of living clearly below that of the congregation as a whole. It's sin to ask our called workers to eat bread while the rest of us eat hamburgers or steak.

My friends, that's what we've been doing here at Peace, at least as far as HVL is concerned, for several years. Now we haven't been alone in that. There are 17 congregations in the conference and almost all of them are guilty of the same thing. But our offerings simply have not kept pace with our ministry there or here. And we have given almost nothing to synod for several years. Individually, we are not all guilty. I'm certain that many of you give generously to the Lord. I'm equally certain that some of you have very little to give. But it is also undeniably true that many of us give God the leftovers. Instead of taking our offering off the top, we wait until we've paid our bills and had our vacations and been to Starbucks and bought all our toys and then we see what's left over. And guess what? It's not enough to support our ministry.

Why is this so hard for us? That's easy: we're sinners. By nature, we don't trust God enough to believe that giving generously to him is going to be a blessing for us. Our sinful hearts constantly think, "The more I give him, the less there is for me." But imagine where we would be if God looked at it like that. Imagine where we would be if Jesus said, "Dying on that cross sounds awful painful. I don't think I want to do that." If God had been too selfish to send his Son to die for us, if Jesus had been too selfish to pay for our sins, we would all be on the road to hell right now.

But God wasn't selfish at all. He sent his Son to die for us. Jesus took all our sin and all our selfishness to the cross. He died for all the times we weren't generous in our offerings to the Lord. Jesus died because we put ourselves first, again and again. Jesus suffered hell itself on the cross and he died there so that we don't have to do that. And then he rose and declared that all that sin is paid for. God does not change so we are not

destroyed. In spite of all our selfishness and unfaithfulness, God keeps coming back to us and telling us he loves us. God keeps coming back to us and calling us to repent of our sins, to change our attitudes, to return to him and trust in him and live for him.

God makes all that happen in our hearts. The Holy Spirit convicts us – he makes us feel bad because we haven't lived up to God's standard. But then he works through the announcement of forgiveness to give us peace. He takes away the guilt – before we ever give a dime. Jesus has forgiven you, whether you give a gift or not! But once you know you are forgiven, you change. Hearing that Jesus loves you and God forgives you leads you to trust in God and do what is right. It leads you to be generous with him. You have that trust. Now live it. Be generous.

## II.

The selfish sinner inside us hates this discussion. He wants you that think this is all about me wanting more money. So I won't say another word about salaries. But God calls us to hear what he says and he calls me to teach it. The sinner inside us isn't just selfish. He's a coward. And he uses fear to undermine our faith so that we don't live as God calls us to. God addresses that for us today, too. My friends, **do we trust God? Do we trust his control of the world?**

How does fear undermine our trust in God? Well, what makes it hard to tell a coworker about Jesus? Fear closes our mouths. Only trust in God opens them again. The same thing happens with our support for the Lord's work. God calls us to trust him and be generous. But what happens in our hearts? That sinful nature does the math. He says, "If you give ten dollars more this week, that's ten dollars you won't have. What if you need it?" It adds up ten dollars over fifty-two weeks and says, "That a car payment – maybe two. That's part of a house payment. That's weeks worth of groceries – that money has to come from somewhere."

Of course, that's true. But God says, "Forget about the math. I'm taking care of you." That's what God said to Israel. They had a problem. Their harvests were bad. Their standard of living was sinking. God told them that they were under a curse because they were robbing him. In the Old Testament God told his people that if they were faithful in living under the Mt. Sinai covenant, he would give them prosperity. But if they broke that covenant, no matter how hard they worked, they would only go backwards. That's what was happening.

But God promised that if they repented and changed their lives, he would bless them again. He said, **"Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it."** You know what? We have the same kind of promise. We don't live under the Mt. Sinai covenant, but God promises that he will always give us more than we can possibly give him. In the reading from 2 Corinthians that we heard a few minutes ago, God used the image of planting seeds. If you only plant a few seeds, you're going to have a smaller harvest than if you plant a lot of seeds. My friends, your offering is your seed. God will defy all the ways that we think the world works and he will multiply that gift back to you. It may not always come back to you in money. But God promises that the more generous we are with him, the more he will be generous with us. That's his promise when we're afraid of cost of being generous.

But he wants the gift to be willing. It's not my job to twist your arm. You are free in Christ to decide what your level of giving will be. 1%. 5%. 50%. That's between you and God and I don't get to ask you about it. But God does want you to think about this and to make a free decision that represents the blessings he has given you and that you can honestly call generous.

And it doesn't have to be money. Your time is a gift to God. You work and your talents are gifts to God. And the truth is, you don't just give to God here. The time you spend teaching your children to know the Lord is a gift to the Lord. The effort you put into making sure that your parents are loved and cared for is a gift to the Lord. Money you give to charity is a gift to the Lord. But your ministry here is a part of what God calls you to support. He promises that he will bless you in all that you give and he will work in your heart to make you generous to him.

Trust God's love for you. His love has already given you Jesus. That love will stay with you all your life. Trust in God's care for you. This world is under his control. No matter how much you give to him, you will always have all that he wants you to have. Commit yourself to a life of generous service to the Lord. Amen.