



STEWARDSHIP SUNDAY (TITHING OF FINANCES)

CULTURAL RESOURCES

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I. History

Financial giving to God for African American Christians has more than Judeo-Christian roots. This practice, according to John Mbiti, is prevalent in African traditional religions, which were in existence long before Christianity. Mbiti states, “Sacrifices and offerings constitute one of the commonest acts of worship among African peoples; and examples of them are overwhelmingly many.”¹ Sacrifices and offerings are thus the primary act of worship in African traditional religions. Mbiti acknowledges that a number of theories attempt to explain why African traditional religions make giving a primary part of worship, and he offers an additional theory: maintenance of balance between God and humanity. “The making of sacrifices and offerings...is also a...device to restore this...balance. It is also an act and occasion of making and renewing contact between God and [humanity]...i.e. the spiritual and the physical worlds.”²

Here, the African American Christian can make the connection between her or his African and Judeo-Christian heritages with regards to tithing. Today’s scripture in Malachi highlights how the ancient Judaic faith was concerned with giving as a primary act of worship. When human giving is consistent and earnest, God is pleased and returns the blessing with so much interest that the giver will not have the capacity to contain the entirety of God’s gift. Underlying this

miraculous reciprocity is Mbiti's idea of balance between God and humanity. When God's people are obedient in their giving, their relationship with God is nurtured and preserved. On the other hand, failure (or even partial obedience) in giving so negatively disturbs the relationship between God and those who fail to give that the writer of Malachi says God describes them as robbers!

It must be noted that another correlation between the giving of ancient Judaism and African traditional religions is that offerings consisted primarily of animal and plant life. These societies were mostly farming communities. Therefore, their finances were their crops and herds. This is important because the worshipper (both ancient Jew and ancient African) gave to God what was in her or his charge. For example, in ancient Judaism, a worshipper would only tithe produce when it ripened because "at this point the crop becomes valuable as property. Payment of the tithes is not due...until the farmer or householder actually claims his harvested produce as personal property."³ Hence, the effective steward manages properly (i.e., according to God's command) that which God has entrusted to her or him.

The point of departure for giving in ancient Judaism and African traditional religions is the Judaic emphasis on the tithe and institutional maintenance. The writer of Malachi records that God commands God's people to bring the full tithe. Tithe simply means one-tenth. In this ancient religious context, tithe was one-tenth of a person's harvest or increase in livestock. These tithes, according to Malachi, aided the upkeep of the temple. Giving ten percent of one's income and the financial preservation of the church are some of the current concerns in stewardship.

II. Contemporary Stumbling Blocks

In September 2008, the United States experienced a catastrophic blow from an ongoing economic downturn of enormous proportions. In light of the soaring numbers of home foreclosures, job losses, and those mired in credit card and health care debt, many compared this financial collapse to that of the Great Depression. Today, our country is still recovering from that economic devastation. In this context, asking parishioners to consistently, earnestly, and cheerfully give ten percent of her or his income to the church is a complex task for pastors.

Churchgoers face some major obstacles in being tithers. First, they are surrounded and perhaps negatively influenced by greed. Greed – in numerous corporations looking for perpetual profits and in a multitude of consumers chasing lifestyles that they could not afford – was a prime factor in the economic downturn. Interestingly, the writer of Malachi identifies greed as the prevailing attitude that keeps worshippers from tithing. The writer of Haggai, Malachi's contemporary, accuses worshippers of pouring their financial support into their own homes instead of the temple, which needed to be rebuilt.⁴ Unfortunately, that picture of greed seems to appear in some churches. These churches have wholly incorporated the capitalist paradigm and operate like corporations.⁵ As a result, one may assume that profit is the church's goal and then find it difficult to tithe.

Second, though the economy has shown signs of recovery, true restoration is still in question. In times of economic uncertainty, people's charitable contributions (including tithes and offerings to the church) generally decline.⁶ Since the rule for tithing is giving ten percent of one's income,

the amount of tithes a church receives will decrease as parishioners get pay cuts or released from their jobs. In cases where a person has not lost her or his job in this financial environment, she or he may be steady in tithing but may not give much more.

III. Strategies

Education brings light to darkness. Thus, teaching about stewardship – even in times of financial difficulty – is the best solution in motivating persons to tithe. There are several ways the pastor may do this. Let us briefly look at the model established by Reverend Dr. William D. Watley, the pastor of St. James African Methodist Episcopal Church in Newark, New Jersey.

The pastor may preach a series of sermons focusing on stewardship. According to Watley, the pastor should be prepared for initial resistance. Yet, he testifies that the pastor can eventually experience success if she or he is prepared. Preparation involves being a faithful tither and student of texts (biblical and non-biblical) that give healthy instructions on tithing. The pastor will also experience success if she or he depends on and teaches her or his church to depend on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Tithing is ultimately the result of one's relationship with God through the Holy Spirit. Therefore, the Holy Spirit will guide the pastor in teaching about stewardship, and the Holy Spirit will guide parishioners in their responses. The pastor will then be successful when she or he recognizes tithing as a divine ordinance.⁷

With this in mind, the pastor does not have to resort to fear tactics or offering false hope to motivate her or his congregants to tithe. Some pastors often focus on the curse in Malachi to scare their church members into tithing. Ironically, anyone who tithes out of fear is doing so in vain since cheerfulness and willingness in giving are required to please God.⁸ On the other hand, certain other pastors will emphasize the overflowing blessing from heaven to entice their congregations into tithing. Thus, these pastors are cultivating greed instead of stewardship. The primary emphases and reasons in Malachi for tithing are obedience to God and to put food in the storehouse (upkeep of the church). The overflowing blessing of God is a byproduct of a generous spirit. Tithing is an act of worship. It is done only to honor God and to bless God's community. The primary blessings of tithing are a deepened relationship with God (as a result of obedience) and the preservation of the religious community. The overflowing blessing is what comes when tithing is done without emphasis on getting something in return.

In addition to preaching on tithing, Watley also teaches Bible studies on stewardship, writes publications on stewardship, has regular stewardship campaigns, orients his church's first financial frame of reference around the tithe, and regularly directs his church to give to those (both inside and outside of the congregation) in need. Additionally, in his teaching on tithing, Watley stresses prudent management of the ninety percent of the income that the tither keeps.⁹

IV. Personal Testimony

I grew up in a Christian family that tithed faithfully and taught me to do the same. We were middle class and had our fair share of financial struggles, particularly during the Regan years. As a result of our struggles, my parents did not have enough money to send me to college. So, I had to earn a scholarship. God blessed my study, and I performed well academically in high school.

As a result, I earned full scholarships to several schools. However, I only received a partial scholarship from my school of choice. My parents advised me to attend the college of my choice and that, somehow, my financial situation would work out.

Shortly after I accepted the partial scholarship to my school of choice, I received an invitation to come there early (just after graduation) and get a head start on my course work. I would also get a small stipend for doing research in my major field. Even though the stipend would not cover what I lacked, my parents insisted that I would find a blessing if I joined this program.

Again, God blessed my study, and I performed well in this program. Unfortunately, I did not find the blessing my parents expected as the program was ending. The last night of the program, I (along with a select few of my classmates) was asked to attend a service at a neighboring school the next day. When I arrived and took my seat with my classmates, I saw a number of students from that institution being awarded with full scholarships that provided them with ample financial stipends and internships at a prestigious corporation. At that moment, I thought that God was adding insult to injury! Just before the service ended, an official from my school took the podium and announced that this same scholarship would be unexpectedly given to the students in the rear of the auditorium. My classmates and I looked behind us and realized that we were the students in the rear of the auditorium! I was the recipient of the scholarship that I needed and desired. Yes, my hard work played a part because it put me in the right position. However, I believe that the window in heaven was unlocked because God honored the faithful tithing of my family.

V. Songs that Speak to the Moment

Although we do not tithe expecting a return (since God will never owe us anything) regardless what we do, God graciously fills our cups anyway. In the song, "Running Over," Joe Pace says this well. In the classic, "Great Is Thy Faithfulness," the writer makes clear how blessed we are; God is faithful. This is reason to rejoice.

Running Over

Pressed down shaken together; running over, running over (repeat 4 times)

When you give unto the Lord

He will give you more

So cheerfully now bring your offering

And you'll have blessings running over, running over

Blessings running over, running over

Pressed down shaken together; running over, running over (repeat twice)

When you give unto the Lord

He will give you more

So cheerfully now bring your offering

And you'll have blessings running over, running over

Blessings running over, running over

When you give unto the Lord

He will give you more
So cheerfully now bring your offering unto the Lord!

The windows of heaven will open unto you
Running over, blessings running over
So many blessings you want have any room
Running over, blessings running over (repeat this verse)

When you give unto the Lord
He will give you more
So cheerfully now bring your offering unto the Lord!

The windows of heaven will open unto you
Running over, blessings running over.

So many blessings you want have any room
Running over
Blessings running over (repeat)¹⁰

You Can't Beat God's Giving

Chorus:

You can't beat God's giving, no matter how you try.
And just as sure as you are living
and the Lord is in heaven on high.
The more you give, the more He give to you,
but keep on giving because it's really true
that you can't beat God's giving,
no matter how you try.

Should we receive and never give,
the Savior died that we might live.
His life on Calvary, He gladly gave,
our sinful souls to save.

Chorus

He gives me health, He keeps me strong,
He guides me when I would go wrong,
He gives me everything that I need,
my ever hunger feeds.

Chorus

He gave me peace, He made me whole,
and when in sin He saved my soul.
And what I gave would never be compared

with the blessing that I share.

Chorus¹¹

Great Is Thy Faithfulness

Great is Thy faithfulness, O God my Father
There is no shadow of turning with Thee
Thou changest not, Thy compassions they fail not
As Thou has been Thou forever wilt be

Chorus

Great is Thy faithfulness
Great is Thy faithfulness
Morning by morning new mercies I see
All I have needed Thy hand hath provided
Great is Thy faithfulness Lord unto me

Summer and winter, and springtime and harvest
Sun, moon and stars in their courses above
Join with all nature in manifold witness
To Thy great faithfulness, mercy and love

Chorus

Pardon for sin and a peace that endureth
Thy own dear presence to cheer and to guide
Strength for today and bright hope for tomorrow
Blessings all mine, with ten thousand beside¹²

What Shall I Render

What shall I render unto God for all His blessings?
What shall I render, what shall I give?

Chorus

God has everything.
Everything belongs to Him.
God has everything.
Everything belongs to Him.
What shall I render?
What shall I give?

Verse 2

All I can render is my body and my soul.
That's all I can render, that's all I can give.

Chorus¹³

VI. Books for This Lectionary Moment

Johnson, Derek E. You Always Have Options: Guiding Principles for Managing Money. Atlanta, GA: Unique Publishers, 2006.

Miller, James F. Go Build a Church: Spiritual Administration for Growth. Enumclaw, WA: WinePress Publishing, 2007.

Walker, Wyatt T. Common Thieves: A Tithing Manual for Black Christians and Others. New York, NY: Martin Luther King Fellows Press, 1986.

Walton, Jonathan L. Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism. New York, NY: University Press, 2009.

Watley, William D. 10 Steps to Financial Freedom. Newark, NJ: New Seasons Press, 2007.

Watley, William D. Bring the Full Tithes: Sermons on the Grace of Giving. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995.

Notes

1. Mbiti, John S. African Religions and Philosophy. Oxford, UK: Heinmann Educational Publishers, 1989. p. 58. Mbiti explains that even if an offering is given to a spirit other than God, that spirit ultimately takes the offering to God.
2. Ibid., p. 59.
3. Jaffee, Martin S. Mishnah's Theology of Tithing: A Study of Tractate Maaserot. Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1981. p. 1.
4. Haggai 1:1-9.
5. Walton, Jonathan L. Watch This: The Ethics and Aesthetics of Black Televangelism. New York, NY: New York University Press, 2009. pp. 156-158.
6. Paarlberg, Laurie E. "Managing in Lean Times." Jewish Federations.Org. Online location: [http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/ujcfiles/ga09/program/spkrdownloads/\(F08\)%20Successful%20Management%20in%20Lean%20Times%20-%20Powerpoint2.PDF](http://www.jewishfederations.org/local_includes/ujcfiles/ga09/program/spkrdownloads/(F08)%20Successful%20Management%20in%20Lean%20Times%20-%20Powerpoint2.PDF). This site contains the discussion paper by Laurie E. Paarlberg, a professor in the public administration program of the University of North Carolina Wilmington, entitled "Nonprofits and the Economic Recession."
7. Watley, William D. Bring the Full Tithes: Sermons on the Grace of Giving. Valley Forge, PA: Judson Press, 1995. pp. 2-9.
8. 2 Corinthians 9:7.
9. Watley, William D. 10 Steps to Financial Freedom. Newark, NJ: New Seasons Press, 2007. pp. 3-23.
10. Pace, Joe. "Running Over." Performed on Joe Pace Presents: Sunday Morning Service.
11. Akers, Doris. "You Can't Beat God's Giving." Performed on The Best of the Caravans by the Caravans.

12. Chisholm, Thomas O. "Great is Thy Faithfulness." African American Heritage Hymnal. Chicago, IL: GIA Press, 2001. #158
13. Douroux, Margaret P. "What Shall I Render." African American Heritage Hymnal. #389