

## A Generous Spirit

Malachi 3:6-10, II Corinthians 8:1-9

You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain. You remember that one – the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment in the 10 commandments. You shall not take the name of the Lord your God in vain, for the Lord will not hold him guiltless who takes his name in vain. What does that mean? How do we take the name of the Lord in vain?

I grew up hearing that commandment invoked whenever somebody used a swear word and they used God's name with it. And I remember as a child, my mother giving us a clear warning of the consequences for any use of cursing or profanity. I can hear my mother's words: If you say any of those bad words, I gonna have to wash out your mouth with soap. Well, I guess it must have worked, because using profanities has not been one of my habits. And yet today, we hear it all the time, on television, in the movies, the workplace, and at school. Some of the words that we used to be shocked by hearing, are now almost commonplace.

Today we continue on the path of discipleship and you may wonder what does all this talk about the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment have to do with my walk as Jesus' disciple. The more you look into this commandment, the more you realize it's not so much about swearing or using bad words as much as it is about profaning the name of the Lord. In otherwords, taking the name of the Lord too casually or lightly. What we are really talking about is the importance of reverencing God's name. It is so much more than using a swear word and God's name together. It is all about honoring God with our lives. It's about lifting up the name of the Lord. And this morning I want to submit to you that profaning the name of the Lord is related to the practice of our stewardship.

We have been focusing on living as a disciple of Jesus Christ and considering how do I live my life following the spiritual disciplines of the faith that will deepen my relationship with the Lord. We have focused on prayer, the study of the Scriptures, the priority of presence, gathering together in worship and small groups. Today we consider another essential practice of our faith. How do we use the resources God has given us? What does the Word of God say to me

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about the use of my money? What does it mean to live in the spirit of generosity?

And so we come back to the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment. I believe this was the issue at hand for the people in the prophet Malachi's day and now he declares the word of the Lord. This was the problem: the people were offering to God their blemished sacrifices on the altar. You hear God's confrontation of the priests: "O priests, who despise my name, by offering polluted food on my altar."

You see what was happening. The people were bringing their crippled animals for sacrifice and keeping the best for themselves. It really came down to the motive of their hearts. Bringing their 2<sup>nd</sup> best, or maybe even 3<sup>rd</sup> or 4<sup>th</sup> best and by doing so, it was an act of rebellion and profanity. They were offering to God their leftovers. And God was looking for their best. They were more concerned about the profit they would keep by holding on to their best rams. Profaning God's name had to do with the attitude of their hearts.

That's why I see this practice as violating the 3<sup>rd</sup> commandment. In reality they had taken the name of the Lord in vain, for they did not honor God in the giving of their best. They deliberately held back, and thereby profaned the name of the Lord. God was not pleased with their leftovers

Today I want us to consider our practice of giving as a disciple of Jesus Christ. This is part of the pathway of discipleship. I know when it comes to talking about money and our practice of giving, we often would prefer that we take a detour on this path. Or maybe we're thinking, why do we have to talk about this subject in church. Stewardship, especially when it comes to our giving to the church is not usually a popular topic. And obviously in the church we come up with all kinds of ideas and proposals on how to help people to give. I came across a few clever one in some church cartoons. (show two church cartoons) Not sure the finance committee will authorize any of these approaches. Much more important than these unusual methods, is the personal response that each of us makes when it comes to supporting the Lord's work. And I know that we often say this is a personal matter, I can make my own decisions. But as much as we would like to take that detour, the fact of the matter is that our practice of

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giving is very much a spiritual issue. A very important part of our discipleship. And when you think about it, Jesus talked about it a lot...when you start to study the matter of money, and stewardship and giving, you realize that the only subject Jesus talked about more was the kingdom of God. And there's a reason for that. The use of our money, the practice of our giving is very much connected to our heart. It says a lot about what is most important to us. So Jesus would say to his followers: "Where your treasure is, there will your heart be also." Before we can properly consider our stewardship, what we should give, we have to focus on how our spiritual life impacts this practice.

A number of years ago, I attended a district meeting where Peter Mikuliak who worked for Church World Service, shared some interesting history about the church in Russia in the early days of the communist government. He said a meeting was held in 1924 when the government made the decision to restrict the church to only gather for prayer and the celebration of the Lord's supper. The church could not provide any education for children under 18 and all hospital and charitable work had to be stopped. The state thought that such an action would eventually destroy the church, but Peter went on to say, that the one area that was not cut off – the practice of praying together and sharing the Lord's supper was what sustained the church, because they were able to keep their spiritual focus. If they have been allowed to continue their charitable work, but prayer and communion had been cut off, Peter believes that the church may have just become another social agency. In otherwords, it is critical to keep a spiritual focus in all we do. Before we can talk about the practice of our giving, we first need to check our hearts, our relationship with the Lord. Ask God, where is my treasure...because that's where my heart is...or maybe we can say it conversely. Where is my heart, because that is also where my treasure is...it says a lot about what I value the most.

You see there is this direct correlation between my spiritual life and my practice of giving. The attitude of my heart affects how I value and manage my possessions. My stewardship has to do with how I handle, manage, and share the resources God has entrusted to me.

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This has such broad implications. Yes, stewardship has to do with our financial resources, and also the use of our time, our talents and gifts, how we treat God's creation. In all of this, we first must check the attitude of our heart.

And so here's the question: Have we been giving to God our best? Have we been willing to bring the sacrifice that truly honors God's name...or does God see us bringing the leftovers, the 2<sup>nd</sup> best, or 3<sup>rd</sup> best? As a disciple of Jesus Christ, are we giving our best or could our giving be seen as profaning the Lord's name? I know these are tough questions, and sometimes we don't want to talk about it, but they are important questions in the life of the disciple. These are questions that get right to the heart of our faith.

I believe that's why the practice of tithing can be such a helpful discipline. Tithing is giving 10% of what we receive back to the work of the Lord. It's what the Bible calls the first fruits. It's one of those topics we often shy away from and maybe even resist. Often the subject of church cartoons. (show one on tithing) For most of us, it just isn't going to happen, unless we make it a habit, to first pay our tithe and then live on the rest. We can have the best intentions in our giving, but if our thinking is, I will try to give my tithes and offerings after I see what is left...what often happens is that God gets our leftovers.

For the people in Malachi's day, the message of the prophet was clear:" "You are robbing me," God says. And the people respond: "How are we robbing you?" The answer: "In your tithes and offerings, bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house. Put me to the test", says the Lord of hosts, "and see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

God had challenged the people – to be willing to give of their best, to truly honor and reverence God's name by the sacrifice of their hearts, by the full offering of themselves.

When it comes to how we live as Jesus' disciples, I would call this kind of practice, the grace of giving. It is learning how to let go and trust in the care and provisions of God. And that becomes our challenge as a congregation as we

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consider the ministry and mission of our church. Are we willing to give of our best? We want to honor God's name in the way we give.

Look with me at how the apostle Paul viewed the ministry of the church at Macedonia. Our reading from II Corinthians 8. "We must tell you about the grace God has given to the Macedonian church." You see, this Macedonian church was not an affluent church. It had been under severe trial and affliction. But it still had the desire to give. Paul says they were begging for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints. "They pleaded with us, for the privilege of sharing in this ministry." Here was a church honoring God in the giving of their best, not holding back.

And so as a disciple, I have to ask myself, where have I been holding back? Am I giving my best? In the practice of my giving, in the use my time, talent, gifts? In my willingness to serve, in my offering to God, and my service to my church and community. As a part of the church, we commit ourselves, to support the church's ministry with our prayers, our presence and our gifts. We give because of God's greatest gift, the gift of Jesus to us...II Corinthians : "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake, He became poor, and that by his poverty, you might become rich."

Next Sunday, you will asked to express your support of our church's ministry by bringing forward your commitment card. You should have received that card in the mail or in the next couple days, and we ask you to spend time in prayer to determine how you will give. I ask you to think of your giving in terms of what will honor the Lord's name. Is it giving my best? For some it may mean to begin the practice of tithing, for others it may be a step in that direction. I believe that the challenge for all of us is to think of it as giving first to God and then learning to live on the rest. There is a wonderful quote in our book A Disciple's Path from an Episcopal priest Harold Keucher: "If you really want your heart to be with God...then you might want to change how you give. Don't treat your giving as just another bill that has to be paid or as one that doesn't get paid if there's not enough left over. Don't think of your gift as a tax or as club dues, and for heaven's sake, don't let it be just a tip that's less than you spend on lunches.

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Make your gift a first-fruits offering. Fix a percentage in your heart and in your head, and give that percentage off the top to God every time money goes into your bank or into your hand.” He describes this approach as better for your heart. And truly it is, because it allows us to put our priorities where they need to be. It is learning to let go and trust God so our hearts are set free from the tyranny of our possessions that we often hold on too tightly. It frees us to have a generous spirit.

There is a powerful story about a pastor who had been preaching a stewardship sermon before a very large congregation and calling on his congregation to give in a spirit of sacrifice and generosity. He asked them to bring their gifts to the front of the church as an act of willing and cheerful liberality. Many of the church members came forward to present their offerings and among them was a little girl from a poor family who pulled a ring off her finger and placed it on the altar table and then went back to her seat. After the service was over, the usher sent for the little girl to meet with the pastor. The pastor said to her: “ I saw what you did today and that was beautiful thing, but I want you to know that we received a good offering, and we don’t feel right keeping your treasured ring, so we have decided to give it back to you.” To the pastor’s surprise, she shook her head and refused. “ Pastor, you don’t understand. I didn’t give the ring to you. I gave it to God.”

To me, that’s the true spirit of giving. Of reverencing God’s name. It is in the offering of our hearts, it is in the giving of our best.

You may wonder...why we are talking about this today and not next Sunday, on our commitment Sunday. Because I really want you to pray about the commitment that you will make. I want you to bring your card next week as an act of honoring God’s name, that we will bring our tithes and offerings as act of bringing our best to God...that we will experience the grace of giving, of having a generous spirit. Let our lives as Jesus’ disciple bring honor and praise to his name!