

Tithe, Taxes, Kingdom

Intro

- Week 3 of series 'Conversion of the Wallet'
- We've heard Milind challenge us on our collusion with a consumerist culture, especially noticeable when times are tight and we look at doing without some of our previously routine comfort purchases. Times like these we are all forced to tighten our belts...and yet, consider how to sacrificially give to the work of the Kingdom.
- We've considered how money is in fact a spiritual entity, and how each material, financial transaction we make has a spiritual component to it. It stings me to note how many purchases I make reveal just how much trust I put in things to satisfy me rather than seeking happiness in God or feeling the need to get that Starbucks to make it through the day rather than looking to God to sustain me.
- And I think my favorite challenge from the previous weeks: Using giving as a means to scandalize the false god of money. What better way to loosen our bondage to Mammon than to just give it away. It shows our trust to be in God, who loves to show himself a good Father by providing for our needs. Giving dethrones money, refusing to concede to its rule and showing it to be nothing more than a tool to be used to further God's purposes. And giving to the church primarily fuels God's main strategy for showing love, compassion, hope, and proclamation of His Kingdom.
- So the question arises...how much do I give?

Tithe

- It seems scripturally the place to begin is the tithe.
- Appears with Abraham and Melchizidek. Melchizidek the mysterious Priest of Salem, to whom Abraham gives a tenth of his spoils.
- Quickly becomes the standard first offering of the people of Israel: tithe of produce, livestock, given to the Levites as payment for their services, considered a just amount to return to God because of his provision. The tithe belonged to God.
- Malachi criticizes the people for holding back their tithe.
- When times are tight, we have a tendency to hold back thinking, "Surely God will understand my need and not fault me for holding back what, in good times, I would have given him." In thinking like this, though, we view the market as supreme. It controls our giving. When the market is up, we have enough, and hence we give. God has given us enough and we can afford to give some back. When the market is down, we justify our withholding. God sees the market, he knows times are bad and understands that we need this money to survive. Malachi calls this stealing from God.
- We fail to see that God controls our markets. He ordains surplus and recession. And for myriad reasons we don't fully understand, we're facing what looks like a long road ahead. Malachi challenges us to bring the whole tithe...to not hold back...to not see the market as supreme. But instead to see the God who rebukes bugs so that crops can grow; who controls the quantity of fruit produced by the vine; whose mere speech both withers fig trees and fills cold dark nothingness with a warm bright world teeming with life.
- And who says, "Test me in this."
- When Malachi said this, he didn't have to worry about what guys like Benny Hinn, Fred Price, or Creflo Dollar taking his words and misconstruing them into a gospel of prosperity. So we have to be careful what we make of this "test God and give, then see how he opens heaven to bless you."

- But this does strike a chord with NT thinking on giving. We don't give primarily because God, our church's ministries, or the poor *need* our money. We give primarily because it benefits us to give.
- Jesus says to store up treasures in heaven where your money can't rot, get stolen, or disappear in the blip of a computer screen. Provide yourselves with moneybags that do not grow old. The argument is: you will be richer if you give it away. Or as Randy Alcorn puts it “You can't take it with you, but you can send it on ahead.”
- Not only does Jesus argue that we should give for our own benefit, he comes along and blasts the traditional idea of tithe and giving.
- In Matthew 23 Jesus is stringing together woes against the Pharisees, one of them against their tithing their spices and neglecting justice and mercy and the weightier matters of the law. Giving isn't the only issue, and 10% isn't a magical number that makes you right with God.
- In our gospel reading for today, Jesus leads us into this discussion on taxes and brings the kingdom of God into our consideration of giving.
- Here Jesus tells us what to give to God, without even mentioning tithing. As is typical of Jesus, he has a much more radical idea of what it means to follow him and live as a resident of his kingdom.
- Render unto Caesar what is Caesar's and unto God what belongs to God.
- The most basic and most powerful thing we can take from this passage is this: It's ok to give Caesar (Uncle Sam) the little bit he's asking for, go ahead and give it, because *everything* is God's.
- Jesus calls his followers to give nothing less than everything to God.

Taxes

- But before we over-simplify, let's take a bit of a deeper look into this passage.
- Jesus is confronted by a group of religious leaders who want to catch him in a trap. They come with their typical fake groveling, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone's opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?”
- You can almost see their smugness as they 'trap' him with their question.
- If he answers 'No, it is not lawful to pay taxes.' he can be arrested for insurrection and rebelling against Caesar's rule.' Which they would just love.
- If he answers 'Yes, it is lawful to pay taxes.' he risks losing public support- because who wants to pay the army who is oppressing you.
- Yet, Jesus manages to leave everyone stunned at his answer. 'Caesar's image is on the coin, so give it back to him. God's image is imprinted on all of you, so give that back to God.'
- This answer sets up a type of Subversive Obedience which seems should govern our understanding of Tithes, Taxes, and the Kingdom of God.
- We are to honor the requirements of our earthly citizenship, but realize that it is just that. Jesus both upholds the importance of government and diminishes its significance. Governments hold real God-given authority and power. We are to submit to their rule. But remember, even that coin you give to Caesar belongs to God, and He holds the heart of the king in his hands.
- And even when the government is evil, God will fulfill the purposes of his Kingdom. That's part of the reason this text is so scandalous...Jesus doesn't come out and condemn this oppressing regime. And why not? Because he knows that it only holds power because God has allowed it to. The Kingdom of God rules over the kingdoms of men.
- So, sorry Christian Anarchists...Jesus says pay your taxes.

- And most of us do so without thinking twice about it. In Jesus' day, you actually took the produce, livestock, or coins themselves to the temple or to the collectors. You yourself actually physically separated out your tax from the rest of your earnings, and handed it over to the collectors. In our day, for most of us, it is skimmed right off the top so that we never even see the 30% or so that we 'give unto Caesar'.
- In some ways it's nice to not have to write a check out to the Government, or watch our bank account lose a third of its value every two weeks. But it does add a layer of separation which distances us from Jesus' answer to this question.
- It is clear that he is insinuating that our giving unto God should exceed our giving unto Caesar. Granted, what we render unto God is more than just money: time, effort, expertise, the use of our gifts, and money are all gifts which we render unto God.
- *But I wonder if we part with a tithe, 30%, or more of our income rendered unto God as easily as we part with the taxes we automatically render unto Caesar. We don't think twice about giving a third of our salaries away to our government, but give more than 10% back to God? That's tough.*
- I want so much to be a generous giver...but the pressures of city rents and raising a family here seem so crushing. I can't imagine being able to radically give. I want to believe that if I give away too much that God will honor that, and provide for me to pay my rent. But do I dare try him?

Kingdom

- Jesus' challenge is to see the supremacy of His Kingdom. That should impact every aspect of our lives. Including our finances.
- The Treasure Principle
- In this book, Alcorn speaks of R.G. LeTourneau, the inventor of earth moving machines. He gave away 90% of his income and lived on 10%. He said, "I shovel it out, and God shovels it back- but God has a bigger shovel!" (says the inventor of earth moving machines!)
- Or perhaps my favorite story, Alcorn tells of a visit with missionaries in Cairo, Egypt: "The streets of Cairo were hot and dusty. Pat and Rakel Thurman took us down an alley. We drove past Arabic signs to a gate that opened to a plot of overgrown grass. It was a graveyard for American Missionaries. As my family and I followed, Pat pointed to a sun-scorched tombstone that read: 'William Borden, 1887-1913'. Borden, a Yale graduate and heir to great wealth (think milk and Elmer's glue), rejected a life of ease in order to bring the gospel to Muslims. Refusing even to buy himself a car, Borden gave away hundreds of thousands of dollars to missions. After only four months of zealous ministry in Egypt, he contracted spinal meningitis and died at the age of twenty-five. I dusted off the epitaph on Borden's grave. After describing his love and sacrifices for the kingdom of God and for Muslim people, the inscription ended with a phrase I've never forgotten: '**Apart from faith in Christ, there is no explanation for such a life.**'"
- That is a life well rendered unto God.

Closing

- So how do we leave here and do this? For some it may mean committing to a tithe and sticking with it. For others it may mean spending some time wrestling through these things with God so we can see past blighted Wall St. to the blessed Kingdom, for others it may mean cutting living expenses down to 50, 40, 30% (less?) and giving the rest away. And for some, it may mean completely removing yourself from your current life to go somewhere or do something that would be crazy except for Christ.