

**Test Me and See**  
**November 19 and 20, 2022**  
**Last Sunday of Church Year**  
**Stewardship Sunday**  
**Third in a Series, “Finishing Strong”**

**Malachi 3:10 - 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.**

**II Corinthians 9:6 The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.**

Dear friends in Christ,

A story is told of a farmer whose cow had just given birth to twin calves. The farmer came in for supper and said to his wife, “The Lord has blessed us with twin calves. To show my thankfulness to God, I am going to give one of the calves back to Him. His wife asked, “Which one of the calves are you going to give to the Lord?” The farmer responded, “I have not decided.” A few days later, sure enough one of the calves grew sick and then died. The husband came back into the house and said to his wife, “Guess what, dear, the Lord’s calf just died.”

That farmer reminds us of the folks in the days of Malachi. Instead of bringing him the first ten percent of their harvest, they were offering what was left over. Instead of sacrificing the unblemished lambs and calves, they were bringing into the blind and the crippled and the diseased animals - the ones that were going to die anyway.

In our text for today, the Lord God Almighty was reminding His people that He had loved them with an everlasting love. Even though these descendants of Jacob had turned away from His commandments, He had not destroyed them. His mercies were still new every morning. And it is in the context of that abundant mercy that God lodged a complaint and then issued a challenge to His people. Our sermon theme today is “Test Me and See.” Two questions we want to ask about this challenge. *First, what did it mean for the people of Malachi’s day? And secondly, what does it mean for us in our day?*

*First, what did it mean for the people of Malachi’s day?*

The people of Malachi's day had become bored with God. Their worship had turned from relational to ritual. As a result, they were offering blemished sacrifices instead of unblemished. Their priests had become unfaithful. Divorce was commonplace and easy. Their conversations were making God weary. Businessmen were defrauding their employees. Merchants were cheating their customers and taking advantage of widows, orphans, and aliens.

But the most serious complaint Yahweh lodged had to do with their withholding their tithes. They were giving the worst of their flocks instead of the best. The least of their harvest instead of the most. Their attitude seemed to be, "What's the least I can give and still keep God happy?"

The laws of the Old Testament actually required three tithes. The one to which Malachi referred in our texts was for the priests. A second tithe helped celebrate the annual sacred feast. And every third year, the people would give another ten percent to help the poor.

In the Old Testament, the tithe was recognized as belonging to God. People didn't give a tithe. They repaid it to the Owner of all things. Rarely does the Bible speak of giving a tithe, but rather of taking or presenting or paying the tithe. Offerings, on the other hand, were and are by definition voluntary. Given from the heart when touched by God's grace.

I may owe an apology to Karl Peterman, a Principal who served alongside me at Immanuel Lutheran Church and School near Lewiston Minnesota from 1980 to 1990. At school chapels, he always announced that we would "take the collection now" in contrast to me insisting that we would "receive the offering."

In any case, the complaint lodged in our text by God against the people of Israel wasn't really about the animals or the grain or the money. It was about what that giving represented - their love for Him. God has always wanted His people to know that He loved them and that they should love Him back. And the way that we love Him is by loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Love is, in fact, the summary of all the commandments. The first and greatest commandment is that we should love the Lord our God with all of our hearts and souls and minds. The second is that we should love our neighbors as much as we love ourselves.

Which brings us to our second question today, as we apply God's Old Testament challenge to "test me and see" into our New Testament Church.

*And secondly, what does it mean for us in our day?*

*That's enough!* Those were the words of my dad when two of his kids were squabbling or arguing in the back seat of our 64 Buick Wildcat. Dad didn't say much, but when he did speak, we tended to listen. Since there were six of us in a six passenger car, there was not much room to spare, and kids will be kids. Dad would listen for just so long, and when his patience had ended, he would bark, "That's enough." If one of us dared to cry out, "He started it," you know what my dad would say. "And I'll finish it!"

On this last Sunday of the Church Year, we do well to wonder if God is nearing the end of patience with this world, with this nation, with His Church, with you, and with me. In so many ways, we squabble and argue about issues that don't really matter, like teenagers in the back seat of a car. As a nation, we have tested God's patience by doing what is right in our own eyes, by redefining sin and taking for granted His blessings. We should not be surprised if soon and very soon, our Father barks out, "that's enough," the trumpet sounds forth, the archangel shouts, and the Son of Man returns in glory.

But one more time in this Church Year, God would be patient with us. He takes a deep breath, He looks us in the eyes, and He updates His promise of "Test me and see." In today's Epistle Lesson, the language is that of "You go ahead and sow bountifully, and I'll make sure you reap bountifully." You go ahead and give in cheerful fashion, and I will increase the harvest of your righteousness. You go ahead and do the good works I have set before you, and I will make sure that you are enriched in every way to be generous in every way. You go ahead and keep planting the seeds of my Word, and I will multiply that seed, and the needs of the saints will not only be met, but there will be an overflowing abundance of thanksgiving to God.

Many of you have been listening to stewardship sermons for 60, 70, 80 years or more now. You know what I'm about to say. You know that God is the creator and that we are the created with every good reason to be grateful. He is the giver of all good things, and we are the recipients with every good reason to be thankful. He is the Lover and we are the loved. He is the forgiver and we are the forgiven.

When He speaks, we do well to listen. When He challenges, we do well to sit up straight and rise to the challenge. His challenge to us today is to commit one more

time to give of your time and your talents and your treasure in a sacrificial and first-fruit fashion and see if God will do what He says He will do - namely open up the floodgates of heaven and pour out so many blessings in this next church year that we won't know what to do with them all.

Three good reasons I offer you, in closing today. Three good reasons to give sacrificially, to give in first-fruit fashion, and to give cheerfully in the months to come.

***Reason #1 is that it's the right thing to do.***

When I say giving sacrificially and in first-fruit fashion and cheerfully is the right thing to do, I appeal to your sense of duty. In the same way that parents deserve to be honored and coaches deserve to be listened to and law enforcement deserves to be respected, so does God Almighty deserve to be honored, listened to, and respected.

God so loved the world that He sacrificed His only begotten Son. In response, we look for ways to serve Him in sacrificial ways. When it came time to suffer and be slapped around and spit at and beat up and tortured and ridiculed and be crucified until he was dead and buried, Jesus held nothing back. He gave His all. He passed the test. Now He invites us to spend our days not only thanking and praising and worshiping, but also giving and serving and laying down our lives.

***Reason #2 is that it will be good for your neighbors.***

When God insisted through Malachi that the people bring a tithe into His storehouse, it was all about the work of His Kingdom going forward. Those tithes supported the priests who made sure the sacrificial system was carried through decently and in order. Those tithes made sure an annual feast would be properly celebrated in honor of the God who had redeemed out of Egypt and across the Red Sea and through the wilderness and into the Promised Land. Those tithes made sure the poor in their midst would be taken care of.

The cheerful and sacrificial and first-fruit giving of time and treasure and talents here at Faith Lutheran are good for our neighbors. (Story of Herbert and Holly down in Ft. Meyers)

***Reason #3 is that it will be good for you.***

Talk to any Sunday School teacher who has taught for years and even decades, and that teacher will tell you that she gained so very much from that experience from preparing for and teaching the classes. Talk to any volunteer in the Church, and chances are he or she will tell you that they have been blessed so richly by the opportunities to serve. (Story of our team in Ft. Meyers removing tile floor in House #2 on Tuesday / the small feelings of accomplishment / statistics 350,000 cars ruined by flood waters, 200 million tons of debris already hauled away)

Test me and see. There is no doubt in my mind that Debi's parents and my parents heard that same challenge years ago, and they accepted that challenge. Both her parents and my parents were active church goers and supporters. I know for a fact that they gave cheerfully, sacrificially, and in first-fruit fashion, in response to Jesus Christ laying down His life as their Savior and Lord. And now the question to be answered - did God open up the floodgates and bless them with so many blessings that they would have a hard time counting them? I did a little calculating with just our little branch of the family. When I added up the birthdays Debi and I, our four children, and our 16 grandchildren have celebrated, I came to a grand total of 464 years. That's 170,000 sunrises and sunsets or so. And that's just the blessing of time, not to mention the blessings of talents, treasures, and opportunities.

The kingdom of God is like a congregation of believers that stands in a long line of precious and forgiven and loved saints of God who have fixed their eyes on their Savior through all the ups and downs of life. For generations, their God has invited them to put Him to the test and see if He would open up the floodgates of heaven and bless them. As often as they have done so, He has passed the test. In Jesus' Name. Amen.