

## INTRODUCTION

During the month of January we have been focusing on what it means to be connected. It’s exciting to know you can be connected with the Creator through Jesus. We’ve also seen the importance of being connected through your local church. Last week we discussed how we should get connected with our community by sharing the love of Jesus. Today we’re going to talk about being connected through your commitments.

Most of you have a CONNECTED bracelet, which I’ve asked you to wear for 40 days (that’s through February 20). The purpose of the bracelet is to remind you to maintain your personal connection with God through a daily time of prayer and Bible Study. It’s to allow you to identify other members of the Green Acres Family, and it is to be a conversation starter. When people ask you about the bracelet, you can tell them how you are connected to God and connected through your church. Marsha Lester pointed out that the bracelet is reversible—and she wears it both ways to compliment what ever she’s wearing that day!

I’ve already heard great reports about people wearing them. One of our precious senior adults was involved in an automobile accident this past week and thankfully she survived it. When they got her into the ER she said, “I’m alive because I’m wearing this bracelet. I’m connected to God!” Your story may not be that dramatic, but let me hear from you.

God is busy doing amazing things in our church and around the world. And one of the ways in which you can connect with what God is doing is through making a commitment to support God’s work with your money. If you’re new to our church, you may want to know that I speak on giving only once a year—and this is the Sunday. But actually, we are going to have fun today as we talk about what God’s Word says about making a commitment to support His work.

Jeff traveled from college to a strange town visit his new college sweetheart over the holidays. This was a little town that only had one drug store. He stopped in to buy her some candy. As he was checking out, the pharmacist asked him why he was buying three boxes of chocolate. Jeff explained, “I’m visiting my girlfriend tonight at her house. After dinner we’re going to sit out on her porch swing. If she lets me hold her hand I’ll give a ½ pound box of chocolates. If she lets me kiss her, I’ll give her this one pound box of chocolates. But if she really lets me get romantic with her, well, I’ll give her this three pound box of candy.”

Later that evening Jeff arrived at his girlfriend’s house. As they sat down to eat, Jeff asked if he could say the blessing before the meal. Jeff started praying and he prayed one of the most heartfelt, sincere prayers ever prayed. He prayed on and on. Finally he said, “Amen.” When he finished his girlfriend said, “Why, Jeff, I had no idea that you were so religious!” Jeff said, “And I had no idea that your father was the local pharmacist!”

What you don’t know *can* hurt you! When it comes to giving your money for God’s work, it’s important to hear what He has to say about it. Let’s begin reading in Malachi 3:7-12:

“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?’ Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. 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. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

Notice three important things God is trying to say to you today about your commitment to giving:

### **1. GOD’S COMPLAINT: “YOU ARE ROBBING ME!”**

God’s complaint is that His people were robbing Him. When they asked, “How are we robbing you?” God replied, “In your tithes and offerings.”

God wasn’t repeating Himself. He was speaking of two kinds of giving: (1) A tithe, which simply means 10% and (2) an offering which is the amount you give over and above your tithe. At our church, we preach and practice something called “storehouse tithing.” We believe 10% of everything we produce belongs to God. And in addition to this basic tithe we also believe in making offerings to the Lord.

I’ve never been known to candy-coat a message, so let me put it to you as simply as I know how: If you aren’t giving God 10% of your income, you are robbing God. *I didn’t say that, God did.* How do you expect God to bless you if you are stealing from Him? 100% of what we have belongs to God, but He simply asks us to honor Him with the firstfruits of our income.

Some of you are thinking, “There is NO way I can tithe.” Why? Because your living expenses are so high you can barely make ends meet. That’s the problem. Here’s the way a lot of people give to God. They pay the electric bill, the mortgage, the rent, the car payments, the credit card company and then they look to see if anything is left over to give God.

God doesn’t want your leftovers. He deserves the first fruits of our income. In Proverbs we read “Trust in the Lord with all your heart...Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing...” (Proverbs 3:5, 10)

Everyone loves the first part of that passage—trust in the Lord, yeah! But you’ve got to read it all. The way you *show* that you trust in the Lord with *all* your heart is by giving Him the first fruits of your income.

Now you need to know I’m not preaching on giving so our church will receive more money. We are already blessed, because we have many people in our church who are honoring God with their income. Take for instance what happened last year. Let’s pause for a moment and count our blessings: In 2003 our budget goal was \$9,928,233.00. Our total budget gifts for the year totaled

\$10,431,643.40. In addition to giving more than our goal, our staff members are so conscientious that we *underspent* our budget, so we finished the year with a surplus.

## **TO GOD BE THE GLORY!**

But every year, we start over. And as of January 1 we began a new budget year. How are we standing after three weeks? Our budget goal for this year is \$10,813,466. That breaks down to needing \$207,951 each week. Through three Sundays our budget goal was \$623,853 and we have received \$538,781, so we are behind our budget at this point by \$85,072.03. That’s not too unusual at this point.

I don’t teach on giving once a year because we *need* your money. I do this because *you* need the blessings of God, and giving a tithe and an offering is one of the ways for you to experience the blessings of God.

Does God have a legitimate complaint with you? Have you been robbing God? I don’t know who has or who hasn’t. I only know how much one family gives to Green Acres—mine. But you know. In 2003, did you rob God?

You see everyone should have a financial goal and a financial plan. For Cindy and me, our financial goal is to be debt free, and for the past 25 years we have followed the 10-10-80 financial plan. Being debt free means not owing money on anything that depreciates. The 10-10-80 plan is simple. We give God the first 10% of everything we make, then we take the next 10% and put it into some kind of savings, then the 80% is for living expenses. Some of you can’t tithe because your living expenses are more than 80%—they may be more than 100%! When you start living by the 10-10-80 plan, you’ll be honoring God and you’ll be on your way to be out of debt.

## **2. GOD’S COMMAND: “BRING THE TITHE INTO MY STOREHOUSE!”**

God’s storehouse is where God’s ministry takes place. In the Old Testament context, it was the Temple. In the New Testament age, the local church is God’s storehouse. God expects you to bring His tithe to His storehouse—the church.

Some people try to avoid tithing saying that it was a law of the Old Testament and that it isn’t taught in the New Testament. Indeed it was part of the law of the Old Testament, but Abraham started tithing long before the Law was given to Moses. In the New Testament we are under grace, not law. Jesus spoke of tithing only one time, but He didn’t indicate that it passed away. Jesus said, “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give a tenth (tithe) of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter (justice/love of God) without leaving the former (tithe) undone.” (Luke 11:42) When Jesus says there’s something we *ought* to do, that settles it for me.

At Green Acres we operate our budget on faith. Many churches have members sign pledge cards about how much they expect to give in any year and then that church determines its budget based on those pledges. We don’t do that here. Instead we ask the question, “What do we think God

wants us to do this year?” Then we budget the money to do that and then *by faith* we trust God to provide the necessary resources through His people.

Throughout the centuries the way God’s people have given has changed. In Old Testament times, many of the offerings were agricultural products. Today, we use a different kind of currency. And even in our time, we are seeing a change in currency. That’s why at Green Acres we give you choices, choices, choices on how to honor God through your giving. Here are seven different ways for you to bring God’s tithe into His storehouse:

1. You can give cash or check in your S.M.B.S. Most of the offerings we receive each week come from people who give in their Sunday Morning Bible Study classes. Or you can
2. Place cash or check in offering bags. Some people prefer to give as an act of worship, so we give you a chance to give during the worship services. Or you can place
3. Cash or check in lobby receptacles. Other people want their giving to be more private, so they slip their offerings into the offering receptacles found in our lobbies. Or you may
4. Mail checks to the church office. We have many people who mail in offerings directly to our finance offering each week or month. In addition you can give an
5. Online offering through your bank. If you are using bill pay software, you can designate Green Acres as one of your payees. Last year we started something new that many of our people use. You can give a regular amount each week or month through an
6. Automatic bank draft. If you want more information on how to do this contact our stewardship offering.

This year we are adding even another convenient way for you to give. Starting this month you can make an offering to Green Acres through your credit card ([www.gabc.org/stewardship.htm](http://www.gabc.org/stewardship.htm)). And yes, you can earn air miles or anything else your credit card company offers. If you want more information on giving through your credit card, please contact our stewardship office.

*How* you give isn’t important. What is important is *why* you give. There are three levels of motivation to give. Level 1 says “I have to!” The Jews in the Old Testament gave on that level—it was a law, like paying taxes. Some people today give in the same grudging way. Level 2 says, “I ought to!” That’s the level where people struggle. A person at this level says, “I know I don’t have to tithe to go to heaven, but, after all, Jesus said, ‘these things you ought to do,’ so I guess I’d *ought* to do it, doggone it!” That’s where many of you are today. But there is a Level 3. Level 3 is not “I have to” or even “I ought to.” Level 3 is “I want to!” Level 3 is the level of love. I don’t tithe because it’s some kind of law I’m afraid of breaking. I tithe because I love Jesus! The New Testament teaches that giving ought to be a pleasant experience. In II Corinthians 9:7 the Bible says, “God loves a cheerful giver.” That word cheerful is the Greek word *hilarion* - we get our English word “hilarious” from it. Giving should be a hilarious experience!

When I’m at pastor’s conferences I’m often asked by other pastors what is the “secret” of why Green Acres gives so much money. I tell them it’s no secret. I just tell our members 51 weeks a year to fall in love with Jesus, and then one week a year I tell them one of the ways to love Jesus is to tithe. Because when you are passionately in love with Jesus your money will go to Him naturally.

### 3. GOD’S CHALLENGE: “TEST ME ON THIS!”

In Malachi 3:10 you read something you won’t find anywhere else in the Bible. God issues a personal challenge. He says, “Go ahead, test me on this.” In most of the scriptures we read where God tests us. This is the *only* place in the Bible where God says we may test Him. He says, “Stop robbing Me and start tithing.” If you’ll do this, God says three things will happen as a result.

**(1) Blessings outpoured!** God says he will open the floodgates of heaven and pour out such a blessing that you will not be able to contain it. Do you think God is promising to make you rich if you tithe? That’s not what He’s saying.

Did you hear the story about the lady with light colored hair (I don’t tell blonde jokes) who begged God to let her win the lottery? She said, “Please God! Let me win. I’ll give you 10% if I win.” She didn’t win that week. She said, “Oh God, please let me win the lottery. I need it, and if I win I’ll give you 25%!” She didn’t win again. So she said, “Please God let me win the lottery. If I win I’ll give you 50%” Still, she didn’t win. Finally she got honest with God and said, “God, tell me *why* I haven’t won the lottery!” And God said, “Help me out here, buy a ticket for once!”

No, God isn’t telling you to buy a lottery ticket and He isn’t promising to make you rich. The blessings of heaven are more valuable than money. Heaven offers joy, peace, and a purpose for living—and money can’t buy those things.

**(2) Prevent before!** Look again at Malachi 3:11. In the NKJV God says, “I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes. So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground.” We have an enemy called Satan and Jesus said that he is a thief who comes to steal, kill, and destroy—he is the devourer. I’m just preaching it like it says, but God says, “Honor me by tithing, and I will rebuke the devourer for your sake.” Have you ever noticed there are times when it seems one expense after another just seems to come? What would this year be like for you if God would *prevent* some of these expensive things from happening to you?

I grew up best friends with our pastor’s son, so I spent a lot of time at their house. One evening Brother Fred came in from the hospital and I over heard his wife ask where he had been. Brother Fred said he was at the hospital visiting Brother-So-and-so. She said, “Oh, he’s in the hospital again? What is it this time?” Brother Fred didn’t know I was listening, and he said, “I think he’s in the hospital having his tithe removed!” I didn’t know what he meant...then.

I’m not saying if you tithe you won’t go to the hospital. But just believe God. He promises to provide preventative protection.

**(3) Enjoyment restored!** In Malachi 3:12 God is saying if you honor Him with the tithe that people will look at you and admit you are blessed. He says your life will be delightful! God’s plan for your life is to bless you and for you to enjoy life. Jesus said, “I have come that you might have life and live it to the fullest!” (John 10:10)

Let me say it again. God doesn’t *need* your money. Green Acres doesn’t need you money, but you need to do yourself a favor—honor God this year.

#### 4. MY COMMITMENT: IN 2004 I WILL TRUST:

Okay, it's decision time. This isn't a card you're going to turn in to anyone. This is between you and God alone. This year, who or what are you going to trust. You can either check God or you can check Money. But Jesus said you cannot check both boxes simultaneously.

Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.”  
(Matthew 6:24)

Now there are some of you who used to tithe and for one reason or another, and you stopped. Go ahead, admit it—your life is missing some of the blessings you used to experience. There are others of you that are now followers of Jesus and you've never given 10% of your income to God. Does it seem there is something missing in your faith, and you can't quite put your finger on it? It's probably that you're still robbing God—and you might not have even known it. Oops, but now you do. What are you going to do about it?

I've made this guarantee once a year for the past 20 years and I'll make it again. God is not a liar. And if you aren't tithing, try it for six months, and if your walk with the Lord is not better than it is now, come tell me, and I'll lay down this book and stop preaching. Because if you can't trust God for what He says in Malachi 3:10, then you can't trust Him for what He says in John 3:16. But, my friend, you *can* trust Him. So, go ahead, test Him in this area and see what happens.

#### CONCLUSION

Have you ever heard the expression “prime the pump?” Back in the days when people used hand water pumps, you had to pour water into the pump to often get water flowing out of it. In his book *Living Above the Level of Mediocrity* Chuck Swindoll shares the legend about a man lost in the desert, just dying for a drink of water. He stumbled upon an old weather-beaten, windowless shack, and took refuge inside its walls to find a little shade. As he glanced around, he saw an old water pump about fifteen feet away, and he stumbled over to it. He grabbed the handle and began to pump up and down, but nothing came out. Disappointed, he staggered back to a corner, but then noticed an old jug off to the side. He looked at it, wiped away the dirt and the dust, and read a message that said, “You have to prime the pump with all the water in this jug. P.S. Be sure to fill the jug again before you leave.”

He popped the cork, and sure enough, it was almost full of water! Suddenly, he was faced with a decision. If he drank the water, he could live, but if he poured all the water into the old rusty pump, maybe it would yield fresh, cool water from down deep in the well, all the water he wanted.

He studied the possibility of both options and wondered what he should do. Reluctantly, he poured all the water into the pump. Then he grabbed the handle and began to pump—up and down, up and down. Nothing came out. Up and down, up and down. A little bit began to dribble

out, then a small stream, and finally it gushed! To his great relief fresh, cool water poured out of the rusty pump. Eagerly, he filled the jug and drank from it, and he filled it another time and once again drank its refreshing contents. Then he filled the jug to the top for the next traveler, popped the cork back on, and added this little note: “Believe me, it really works. You have to give it all away before you can get anything back.”

That’s faith! It took faith for the thirsty man to take all the available water to prime the pump. Think of your resources as the jug of water—and then think of God’s blessings as the cool, stream of gushing water. You are faced with a choice as well. Will you keep your resources all to your self, or will you, by faith, prime the pump of God’s flood of blessings? The choice is yours.

## OUTLINE

### 1. GOD’S COMPLAINT: “YOU ARE ROBBING ME!”

“Trust in the Lord with all your heart...Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing...” Proverbs 3:5, 9-10

### 2. GOD’S COMMAND: “BRING THE TITHE INTO MY STOREHOUSE!”

Jesus said, “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give a tenth (tithe) of your mint, rue, and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter (justice/love of God) without leaving the former (tithe) undone.” Luke 11:42

### 3. GOD’S CHALLENGE: “TEST ME ON THIS!”

- (1) Blessings outpoured!
- (2) Prevention before!
- (3) Enjoyment restored!

### 4. MY COMMITMENT: IN 2004 I WILL TRUST:

(check only one)

God

Money

Jesus said, “No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve both God and Money.” Matthew 6:24



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To put it in Texas terms, “You’re mighty welcome to use any and all of my ingredients; just make your own chili!”

For the Joy...  
Pastor David Dykes