

# Filling God's House

A sermon by Larry Kirkpatrick

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God is filling His house; He made men as social creatures, moral creatures, beings in His image, capable of a divine companionship. He desires to remake as many as are willing to be remade. He has not chosen to impose Himself on anyone. We are free.

He calls His people to present a message to the world. For our own benefit, He calls us to have a part in presenting the good news.

Jesus came down and lived in human flesh. He became incarnate. We are incarnate. Angels could proclaim the message, but God's plan is not for His goodness to be talked about from a distance. The successful giving of it in large part depends on us. It is God's design for us to organize ourselves so that His work may be successful.

We have what could be called a "mission footprint." That is, we look to our task, seek to be led of the Lord, arrange what is needed, and invest our resources in the most efficient ways we can think of of doing what God says. We build churches and schools and printing presses; we organize with administrators, theologians, teachers, pastors, evangelists; we fine-tune to our local area, and we work.

But we also forget. Time passes. We lose sight of the original vision. We begin to assume that things will run themselves auto-magically. The walls will stay up, the school will be funded, the lights will stay on, and we will all live happily ever after.

So today, because Jesus has given us the mission for our time, and because things do not run auto-magically, we revisit these things. I want you to know that the leaders of this church have encouraged me to address these matters forthrightly. Our approach today will be from Scripture, but I want to put two other short items from Ellen White at the start. Take a deep breath. . .

Every believer should be wholehearted in his attachment to the church (*Testimonies*, vol. 4, p. 18).

And

Everyone who connects himself with the church makes in that act a solemn vow to work for the interest of the church, and to hold that interest above every worldly consideration. It is his work to preserve a living connection with God, to engage with heart and soul in the great scheme of redemption, and to show, in his life and character, the excellency of God's commandments in contrast with the customs and precepts of the world. Every soul that has made a profession of Christ has pledged himself to be all that it is possible for him to be as a spiritual worker, to be active, zealous, and efficient in his Master's service. Christ expects every man to do his duty; let this be the watchword throughout the ranks of His followers (*Testimonies*, vol. 5, p. 460).

Being zealous is important, but so is knowledge, so that we can be zealous intelligently.

Let's gather fresh knowledge then, starting now.

## **Biblical Principles**

### God Owns Everything

God owns everything.

The earth is the Lord's and the fulness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein, for He has founded it upon the seas and established it upon the rivers (Psalm 24:1 ESV).

God owns the whole earth. He made it to be inhabited (Isaiah 45:18). We have the best recall when we are intentional about reminding ourselves of God's ownership. Knowing this, God made the seventh day sabbath even for unfallen man, to remind Him that God is His Creator. Originally God and man met face-to-face (Genesis 3:8). The Fall of man changed all this; God veiled His presence. The brightness of His glory would be too much for man, and He instituted other means of connection: prophets, deliverers (judges), dreams, and so forth.

## Returning the Tenth

A certain word is becoming rare in our world: “tithe.” But the idea comes to us from the very first book of the Bible. It is first seen in Genesis 14:20. Abraham gives tithes to Melchizedek. But the first substantial explanation is Genesis 28. Recall the story. Jacob, the younger brother, and his mother, conspired to secure the birthright for him from the older brother, Esau. The aging father is deceived by a ruse and blesses Jacob. Esau begins to plot out loud how he will murder Jacob.

Seeing how dangerous things were becoming, it was arranged that Jacob would travel to a far land and live there awhile. And so, Jacob leaves home practically penniless. Cold and alone, he lies down to sleep in the midst of a vast desolation. And God gives to Him a dream. He promises to be with him wherever he goes, and that he would have numerous descendants. Jacob wakes from the dream, and

Then Jacob made a vow, saying, ‘If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, and will give me bread to eat and clothing to wear, so that I come again to my father’s house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God’s house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you’ (Genesis 28:20-22).

The basic meaning of a “tithe” is “one tenth.” Jacob promises to return to God, from the 100% that God gives to Him, 10%. That is the principle. Ten percent is returned to God in recognition that 100% belongs to God. Tithing is not giving to God a gift of 10%, but it is recognizing that He has given to us 100% of what we have. Solomon recognized this, when he prayed,

But who am I, and what is my people, that we should be able thus to offer willingly? For all things come from you, and of your own have we given you (1 Chronicles 29:14).

But someone may object that the Bible says not that we return tithe, but that we pay tithe. Matthew 23:23 KJV has Jesus calling a woe upon the scribes and pharisees because “ye pay tithe” down to the tiniest seeds but leave out mercy. The actual Greek at this place says only that they give a tenth. The word “pay” is not in the text.

By the way, you will notice at 23:23 that when it comes to tithing, Jesus says, “These you ought to have done”—meaning returning tithe, but, He adds, you should not leave out love and mercy.

### Still Valid in New Testament Times

Some teach that in New Testament times, tithing is no longer required by God. But how can they answer Jesus’ New Testament “These you ought to have done” statement? What’s more, Paul confirms that some who do the work of the gospel ought to be paid for it.

Who serves as a soldier at his own expense? Who plants a vineyard without eating any of its fruit? Or who tends a flock without getting some of the milk? Do I say these things on human authority? Does not the Law say the same? For it is written in the Law of Moses, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” Is it for oxen that God is concerned? Does he not speak entirely for our sake? It was written for our sake, because the plowman should plow in hope and the thresher thresh in hope of sharing in the crop. If we have sown spiritual things among you, is it too much if we reap material things from you? If others share this rightful claim on you, do not we even more? Nevertheless, we have not made use of this right, but we endure anything rather than put an obstacle in the way of the gospel of Christ. Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel (1 Corinthians 9:7-14).

Paul says that he personally chose not to receive pay for ministry. But it would have been right for him to. He cites Deuteronomy 25:4 for this, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it is treading out the grain.”

An ox would be harnessed and circle round and round treading out the grain to remove the kernels from the husks. Occasionally the animal would grow hungry from this labor and bend down to eat some of the grain. Some would muzzle the animal to keep him from eating the grain, but inspiration insists that such eating by the animal was not to be prohibited. He is allowed to eat from the very grain that he has labored over. Likewise, It is appropriate for a laborer to have his living from his labor. Paul argued that the plowman plows in hope and that the thresher threshes in hope of sharing in the crop. Finally, he states as plainly as possible, “The Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”

It is true that during the monarchy of Israel, the tithe was used to provide for the Levitical priesthood—which priesthood is no more. But it is also true that God still owns everything, and that tithing is perhaps the most ancient practice for showing this. While in Bible times society was agrarian, the fundamental unit of commerce today is money. In order to accomplish the mission of His church, we use money. God has set up in a formal way an organizational structure, tasked with advancing the accomplishment of the mission of His church. So, as tithe was returned in the medium of exchange in that day, so we return it in the medium of exchange in ours.

## The Teaching in Malachi

### Robbing God

God owns everything. From that basis we understand that any misuse by us of His wealth is robbery of Him. Failure in our stewardship is robbing Him. Remember that His Ten Commandments are a thumbnail sketch of His character, and among the points opposite His character is the violation of the commandment that says, Thou shalt not steal. For a man to rob another man, is supremely offensive to God. But there is something worse: To rob God Himself.

Turn to the book of Malachi. God starts this section (Malachi 3:6-12) on a hopeful note, pointing to His unchanging mercy, and calling His people to repent. In verse seven where it says “return,” the Hebrew word underneath actually means to turn. Elsewhere, it is translated “repent.” So, in verse seven, the call goes out from God for His people to repent. They ask, How shall we repent? Then the accusation: you are breaking My law; you are violating the Ten Commandments; you are taking My name but contradicting My character. You are stealing.

From whom are they to stealing? From God. Notice in verse ten, “the whole nation” has robbed Him. And how have we robbed Him? some must have thought. The answer is plain in Malachi 3:8: “In tithes and offerings.” Some translations say “In your tithes and contributions.”

### Tithes and Offerings

This may sound like merely a statement and then a restatement. But tithe and offering are *not* the same thing. The word here in the Hebrew for tithes means a “tenth” (*MAASER*), and the word where your Bible says “offerings” or “contributions,” is a totally different word (*TERUMAH*).

Do you remember Exodus 25:8, “And let them make Me a sanctuary; that I may dwell among them”? Well, let’s look at the verses just before that. Start at verse one. The *TERUMAH* offering or contribution is spoken of all through these verses. And what is its purpose? It is for the building and maintenance of the sanctuary—the place where God’s people meet with Him.

So there are two separate items in Malachi 3:8. First, the tithe is to support the work of the priests and of the Levites who are spread as salt, as preservative, through Israel. Then, there are the offerings which maintain the buildings. Failure to return tithe and/or to give offering, is called robbery.

I remember when I joined the Seventh-day Adventist Church, I thought that they were asking a great deal. Not just a tithe? An offering too? But when I look at texts such as these, I understand that, actually, Adventists are on the Bible plan. In the Seventh-day Adventist Church, the tithes that are returned fund those who work in the ministry, and the offerings that are given go to maintain the building, the place where today we gather to meet as an assembly with God.

Now, someone might be thinking, “I thought that we are to give offering as we have been blessed. The amount we give is left up to us, isn’t it?” Correct (1 Corinthians 16:2); as far as the Bible goes, no specific numerical amount is called for. But failure to give *some* amount in offering is robbery. It is anticipated that each will give something.

### The Full Tithe

In order to discontinue the robbery of God, Malachi calls for His people to bring “all the tithes” into the storehouse. Notice too that it is the storehouse “singular”; there are not multiple storehouses; there is one. Or, as ESV has it, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse.” So, we are

called to revisit our finances and to make sure that we are being honest and returning to God His full tithe.

But I think this passage is calling us up higher. I don't think that tithe here in verse 10 has reference only particularly to the tithe. Look at the context. God was being robbed not only in tithes, but also in offerings.

After it has been pointed out that God's people have been guilty of double robbery, both, of tithe and of offering, and after God charges His people with this thieving, when He calls them to bring the "full tithe" into the storehouse, that He is actually using the phrase "full tithe" or "all the tithes" in a general way. He is actually referring to His people repenting and becoming faithful in turning from both parts of their double robbery. He is using the phrase here in a general sense, and the meaning is, "repent and return the tithe but give your offering as well. Support not just the priesthood but keep my buildings functional as well." Likewise, we should be faithful in returning tithe and giving the offering as well.

But now, let's talk about the tithe in its particular sense. The tithe, or one tenth, is reckoned on the income, spoken in the Scripture as the "increase." In the case of an employed person, the tithe is paid on the entire salary. In the case of a self-employed person or a business, the tithe is paid on the profit—the amount remaining after deducting the expenses of earning the income. No one is received into membership in the Seventh-day Adventist Church until he or she accepts that the returning of tithe is a scriptural obligation.

### **Redirection of Tithe?**

We are directed by God to bring our tithe into the storehouse. What is the storehouse? For 131 years—since 1879—the Seventh-day Adventist church has operated on the present plan of

tithes and offerings. And the storehouse is understood to be the worldwide Seventh-day Adventist church organization. The gate through which we return tithe is, in particular, one's local conference.

But what if we disagree with how the church organization spends God's money? What then? Shall we withhold our tithe? Think again; it is not *our* tithe to withhold. Will you withhold God's money from Him?

Sometimes, our information is incomplete. If we understood more of the details about how the church uses God's tithe moneys, we might feel very differently. Do you know how your tithe dollar is spent? Here is current information which was given to me this week by our Upper Columbia Conference treasurer Myron Iseminger. It is a penny-by-penny breakdown of how every tithe dollar is put to work for ministry.

73.87 cents — Local Conference

10.75 cents — Employee retirement fund

02.90 cents — Union conference

01.76 cents — North American Division

03.47 cents — GC appropriations to divisions

02.11 cents — GC support of missionaries

03.79 cents — GC office operating costs

01.35 cents — Other appropriations (institutions)

There is no magic way to prevent God's wealth from being misused, but we do have auditors, accountants, treasurers, committees, human resources personnel, and apostles who oversee. They sit on the committees that you don't have to, they fill out the paperwork that you

don't have to, they deal with mundane matters that you don't have to. Any church member who has a question about how the conference is using God's financial resources can call Spokane and ask: 509.838.2761.

But suppose that we have a very clear understanding of the details and we still disagree with the way that some small percentage of the moneys is being used. We feel that this pastor is too liberal to have his living out of the tithe, or that pastor is too conservative to have his living out of the tithe. What then? To make a point, shall we cease from returning the tithe? Or shall we redirect it to some other group, or a private ministry?

We may not often stop to think of this, but let's. The General Conference is regularly audited, its officers are kept accountable to good accounting practices, and you as a church member have a measure of control over how church moneys are spent because you have a representative form of church governance and leaders are elected.

But is a private ministry audited? Many are not. Is it accountable to you? Hardly. Do you have a measure of control? None. It could disappear and that would be that. I know of one independent church that was meeting near Riverside, California, and when a conflict arose in that group, one party declared that it was a private ministry and not a church, and that was that. The moneys were kept under his control and others left.

You may see defects (or think you see them) in conference officers up close, but you cannot see what is happening in a "ministry" far away. Some self-supporting ministries are quite upstanding, but some are not. In any case, none of these are a part of the storehouse in the way that the organized church is.

Paul said that those who presented the true gospel in the church were to live of the gospel. But if you do not tithe, how will these live? The church has defects. Do you know why? Because you and I are in it! But it is still God's fortress that He holds in a revolted world.

If someone is worried about returning the tithe through the church, do this. Our God is a big God. Pray to Him. Ask Him to direct His tithe so that faithful workers receive their living out of His holy tithe that you are returning. Then return your tithe and trust in God. He will see to it that it is rightly directed in His church organization.

### **At Bonners Ferry**

Finally, a look at some specifics for us here at Bonners Ferry Seventh-day Adventist Church In 2009. Now I am not going to go into the fine print, the specific internal funds, but I will share things that you as a congregation ought to know. We are not here to talk business; we are talking about mission.

We have a total church membership of 172 persons (we'll be paring these down to true membership numbers over the next year). We have an average attendance of 90 to 100 persons per sabbath. In 2009, 86 persons returned tithe to God through the Bonners Ferry church. Fifty-nine persons gave to local church budget. However, only 34 persons gave regularly to local church budget. Local church budget basically corresponds to "offering" in Malachi 3:8.

The tithe reports for Bonners Ferry for the last nine years show us ranging between a tithe of \$115,300 - \$161,800 annually. For 2009 we are tracking to almost exactly the same as last year, around \$152,000.

Let us suppose that as a congregation we are close to returning a tithe that truly reflects 10% of the increase that God gives us. Let us say that we have 100 regularly attending members,

and that instead of \$152,000, a faithful tithe for us is \$165,000. Ten percent of \$165,000 would mean that the average annual income of our members here, is \$16,500 (Some are spouses who do not work outside the home, some are retired, some on disability, etc.). Ten percent of that would average \$1650 per member per year returned in tithe. If each gave the 3% minimum suggested donation into local church budget, that would be \$495 annually, for a total of \$49,500 received by the church to spend toward the fulfillment of our mission footprint. What would that look like on a monthly basis? Like \$4125. Or, what if everyone gave the higher recommended number—6% of income—toward local church budget? That would be \$8250.

Thirty-three months ago, in March of 2007, this church passed its current budget: \$2950 a month. That goal has been met exactly three times.

When not met, target amounts have not been fully funded. Now, this is not the whole story. A serious part of the chosen mission footprint of this church is the operation of a grades 1-8 Christian church school. This school is operated on a sacrificial basis by all who are involved with it. When, at the end of the school year, there have been shortfalls, which has been often, this congregation has somehow managed to pay off the deficit. Our school is running behind again this school year. It will need thousands of dollars to make up the present gap.

Average giving toward local church budget for the past year has been about \$2350 per month. In coming weeks, the church will likely approve a lower revised budget, which will be an increase of between \$220 and \$520 per month over 2009 giving. Can we meet that figure? Remember, only 34 of you consistently gave an offering to the church last year. What if that increased after today, by two thirds? Would there be food in Gods house (Malachi 3:10)? Would

God would open the windows of heaven for the Bonners Ferry church? Would He pour out upon us His blessing?

What's more, we would be able to fund a Bible Worker devoted especially to directing and equipping us for evangelistic work from this church. In order to accomplish this, we need to receive a total of about \$500 a month for "evangelism," or, for amounts given to this project to be written in on your tithe envelop as "Bible Worker." We can do this! But we must not take money away from other obligations we have made, such as the operation of the school. But these things are doable for us. We only need to decide to give the work of God a higher priority, and then organize our finances more carefully so that potentials become realities. From this sanctuary can go forth God's law, His gospel, His positive message about Jesus, His message of Present Truth for this hour.

### **Conclusion**

Whenever one reads the Bible, and sees the word "curse," invariably one finds also the word "blessing" nearby. It is no different here. God's people are said to be under a curse—all of the people—because some of the people are unfaithful in returning to God His tithe. There is something that is not transparent in the English language. Here in Malachi three, "you" is plural. Very often in the Bible it is plural. You can tell in Hebrew. You can tell in Greek. You cannot tell in English.

And so, put another way, because some of the members of the local church are stealing from God, all of the members of the local church are, in a sense, under a curse.

That would seem bad news. But did you notice the promise of blessing?

God says, “put me to the test” (Malachi 3:10). He promises that if we repent, if we return to Him, He will “open the windows of heaven” in pouring out His blessing upon us. Again, see the blessing is for us all, for His people, His church. Do you recall seeing that phrase before —”the windows of heaven”?

I’ll tell you where you saw it. Genesis 7:11. There, God is describing the incredible destruction wrought in the flood. The example used in Malachi originates from the Noachian flood! Then, God poured out the waters so that the earth could not contain them. The water rose and covered the highest places of every landmass on the planet. *That* is the kind of abundance of blessing that is promised us if we will be faithful. We will have all that we could possibly need to maintain this church building generously, to operate the Thrift Store, to pay for a teacher and teacher’s aide in the school, to hire a Bible Worker, and to bring the Third Angel’s Message evangelistically before every person in Boundary County in a faithful and appealing way.

If we trust what God has revealed to us in the Bible, we may be absolutely assured that our faithfulness will result in financial sufficiency and mission efficiency. So. Now we have the information. What will we do? Can we maintain such a strong mission footprint? Can we operate this church, this school, do a camp meeting, do the Thrift Store, and spend a more fitting amount on outreach? Can we fill God’s house with more hearts that want to know Jesus? That decision is ours.

**Biographical note:** Larry Kirkpatrick has served in the ministry of the Seventh-day Adventist Church since 1994. He is a pastor of the American West, having led churches in Nevada, Utah, California, and Idaho. His writings include the books *Real Grace for Real People*, and *Cleanse and Close*. Larry and wife Pamela presently serve in the Upper Columbia Conference, ministering to the [Bonners Ferry](#) and Clark Fork churches in the incomparable beauty of Northern Idaho.