**Series: Core Values of Agape Christian Church**

**Sermon: The “if then” Principle**

Are you familiar with “*loaded language*”? “*Loaded language*” refers to a word and phrase that is intended to inspire emotions and ideas beyond what the word or phrase means in itself. Politicians love to use “loaded language”.

E.g.:

* *Government shutdown*. That’s never about shutting down the government. The people who govern are going to get paid no matter what. *Government shutdown* is about turning off the things that serve us and it’s intended to scare people into supporting one side or another in budget debate.
* *Fascism*. Fascism is using force or the threat of force to silence opposing views. In our highly-charge political climate, *fascism* is a loaded term for anything that’s not desirable to the user. By calling someone a fascist the speaker intends to evoke negative emotions against him/her.

In the last presidential election cycle one particular “*loaded phrase*” got used repeatedly to generate negative emotion against certain people. Politicians and talking heads used this phrase over and over without ever defining what they mean by it.

By not defining what it means they were able to generate negative emotions without having to prove their point. Whether in a stump speech or while spewing vitriol against the other party, again and again we heard somebody say this. Do you remember? “*It’s about time the rich* *pay their fair share*.”

I’m not making a political statement here. I don’t care what your politics are. I’m just talking about the use of loaded language. “*Fair share”* is a loaded phrase intended to generate negative emotions against rich people while creating sympathy for poor people.

The reason “*fair share*” is loaded language is because the speakers didn’t defined what they mean by it. I didn’t hear even one speaker define what a “*fair share*” is, but by using loaded language they generated negative emotions against the evil wealthy.

(I’ll give O’Reilly credit, he challenged the talking heads to explain what they meant. “*How much is a fair share?*” he asked. But no one answer him.)

I believe the idea of paying one’s “*fair share*” is a good idea but I have some questions:

* Who determines what is a “*fair share*”?
* Does each man determine for himself?
* And if a “*fair share*” is determined, shouldn’t it be stated?

Do you see my point? The use of “*loaded language*” allows every listener to supply his/her own meaning. What you think is a “*fair share*” might not be what I think is a “*fair share*”.

We’re not here to talk about taxes or politics this morning. We’re here to talk about giving to our church. We can use the phrase “*fair share*” in connection with our offerings – but only if we unload it by defining what we mean.

* Is there a “*fair share*” that each Christian should give to his church?
* And if there is a “*fair share*” what should it be?

Think with me for a minute. It costs money to be a church. A church has property and buildings, electric and gas charges, teaching materials and salaries to pay. Everything cost money. Who’s responsible to pay for it? As part of a church, what’s my “*fair share*”?

I have a good friend who is part of a church near here that started as an all-volunteer church. They intended to have no paid staff. It didn’t talk long for them to realize that volunteers just don’t provide the same level of teaching and care as trained staff, and trained staff cost money. They’re looking to hire a paid preacher right now.

I’m not at all critical for what they’re trying to do. I applaud their efforts. Their goal is to make more money available for ministry by using less for overhead. It just doesn’t work very well in our culture. Certainly we don’t want our church to be about owning buildings and paying staff, but you’d be hard pressed to find a successful all-volunteer church.

It cost money to be a church. Who’s responsible and how much is a “*fair share*”?

Unlike the politicians and talking heads, God doesn’t use “*loaded language*”. God defined “*fair share*”. The Bible consistently uses one concept for a standard of “*fair share*” in giving to God’s work.

According to God’s Word a “*fair share*” is the tithe, giving 10% of income or possessions to God in loving response to His grace and providence.

* Hebrew = *ma aser*
* Greek = 
* Both words mean 1/10th

Tithing was well established in history…

* Babylon took a tithe from the land and from all imports
* Persia demanded a tithe form all imports and soldiers were required to give a tithe of the spoils of war.
* Agamemnon gave a tithe of his possessions to the gods.

For thousands of years if you lived in the area claimed by a king, whether in a city with protective walls (perhaps 6-10 acres), or in the nearby countryside, the king owned the land and you were essentially renting from him. You were taxed 10% and then the king was responsible to provide protection and arrange commerce. 10% was your “*fair share*”.

I should add, often there was a tax for the local deity as well. That “*fair share*” was generally 10% also.

The first mention of a tithe in the Bible is in Genesis 14. Four kings, the King of Sodom, the King of Gomorrah, the King of Zeboiim, and the king of Zoar made an alliance and marched into the Valley of Siddim, pillaging and looting everything. In their raid they carried away Abraham’s nephew Lot and all of his possessions.

When Abraham saw the “Bat Signal” he called his 318 trained fighting men and pursued the four kings, rescuing his nephew and his people and possessions. Afterward as they celebrated the victory, Melchizedek, a priest of God Most High came and offered this blessing:

*Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Possessor of Heaven and Earth. And blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand!”* Genesis 14:19f

The text adds, *then Abram gave him a tenth of everything*. Genesis 14:20 That was a tithe of the spoils of war.

God said to His people, *Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord’s; it is holy to the Lord.* Leviticus 27:30 Tithing wasn’t even an offering. It was commanded in the Law,

Something I find interesting, if you decided to give your tithe in currency rather than I kind (grain or fruit or animals), you had to add 20%. A tithe of cash for $100 worth of grain, instead of being $10 was raised to $12. Apparently there was something about the act of carrying the tithe by hand and presenting it

How serious was God about the tithe? Before even explaining the tithe the Law says, *You shall eat neither bread nor grain parched or fresh…until you have brought the offering of your God: it is a statute forever throughout your generations in all your dwellings.* Leviticus 23:14

The tithe went for three purposes: to run the government, to provide welfare, and to carry out the work of the church. In the OT that would be the Temple or synagogue.

An important factor is that the tithe was to be the “first fruits”, never the leftovers.

* If you harvested 10 acres, the tithe was the first acre.
* If you raised 10 cattle, the tithe was the first one.
* If you earned $1000, the tithe was the first $100.

The tithe was every man’s “*fair share*.” When a man gave the tithe is showed that he trusted God to provide for him with the other 90%.

Catch this. This is important. The difference between a tithe and a tax is that a tax starts out as my money but the government demands a portion. If I don’t give it willingly, they come and take it, plus a penalty.

A tithe starts out at God’s money. He gives it to me. God has always claimed one tenth as a “*fair share*” but it’s up to me to give it back to Him. I can keep it from Him if I choose. If I decide not to give Him the tithe, He won’t take it by force.

The prophet Malachi explained how God feels about people who choose not to give the tithe: *You are robbing me…in your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me.* Malachi 3:8f

“*Hayiq ba*” means to defraud or steal. According to this spokesman of God, a man inspired by the Holy Spirit, when a man fails to give a tithe to God he is defrauding or stealing from God. The principle applies to all people, rich or poor. No one gets a pass.

Before you get ahead of me, I know that nowhere in the New Testament does it say, *You must give a tithe*. The reason neither Jesus nor the Apostles commanded tithing was because it was so standard even among the non-Jewish and non-Christian people, they didn’t need to say it. (Jesus recognized it in Luke 11:42 and 18:11f.)

Instead the NT writers used such words as voluntary, cheerful, planned, generous, sacrificial, eager, and joyful.

Let’s get back to us. Giving a tithe is more than a duty. It’s more than paying a “*fair share*.” Giving a tithe is an expression of love and trust. It says to God, *I believe you. I believe you have provided for me and you will continue to provide for me*.

Giving a tithe is an act of obedience. It’s odd. As Christians we obey God in many things: in worship, in speech, in relationships, but we get a little funny when it comes to money. It’s like God has no business expecting anything to do with our money.

More than once I’ve heard a Christian say, *I can be a Christian and not tithe*. I won’t argue with the statement, but I heartily disagree with the thought process. If you’re only willing to do what you’re specifically commanded to do then you’re not acting in love. You’re living by law.

If you only give a tithe in response to a command, you missed the point. The tithe belongs to God. To not give a tithe is to take something that belongs to God. The principles of the Old Testament are valid today. One facet of Jesus’ teaching is that He always challenged His followers to go beyond what the OT said.

Left me shift gears for a minute because there’s another Biblical principle that applies. A small, but very important word used in the Bible in both the Old and New Testaments challenges everything we do or don’t do.

It’s only two letters but its meaning is clear and far-reaching. The word is “if”. It is used in sequence with another big though small word, “then.” We can call it the “if then” principle.

You see, God gives us options and we choose His way or another. If we choose to trust and obey God, then He promises to bless us. If we choose to deny Him and His will, then His promises are off the table for us.

God said to Israel, *If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant,* (then) *you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation*. Exodus 19:5f

As God established the Law He said,

*If you walk in my statutes and observe my commandments and do them, then I will give you your rains in their season, and the land shall yield its increase, and the trees of the field shall yield their fruit. I will give peace in the land, and you shall lie down, and none shall make you afraid.* Leviticus 26:3-4, 6

Now listen to this:

*But if you will not listen to me and will not do all these commandments, if you spurn my statutes, and if your soul abhors my rules, so that you will not do all my commandments, but break my covenant, then…I will visit you with panic, with wasting disease and fever…and make the heart ache. And you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies shall eat it. I will set my face against you*, Leviticus 26:14-17

Do you see the “if then” sequence? *If you trust and obey, then I will bless you. If you do not, then I will not bless*.

The prophet Isaiah recorded this from God: *Come now, let us reason together, says the Lord:* In other words, think about it. Reason this out.

 *Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow. If you are willing and obedient…but if you refuse and rebel, you shall be eaten by the sword; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken*.” Isaiah 1:18-20

My point is that God’s promises are not unconditional. That “if then” sequence shows up again and again. If we love and obey God, then He will bless us. If we don’t, then He doesn’t promise anything for us. That applies to everything, including tithing.

If you don’t already know and understand this I suggest you do two things. First, with an exhaustive concordance, look up the word “if” and see how often it’s used to indicate this condition on God’s promises.

Second, talk to people who seem to have their Christian lives together. Ask them how important faithfulness to tithing is and how God has blessed them because of it. You will learn that Christians who get along best in life are always people who trust and obey God in all things, including tithing.

Friends, we’re not a tithing church. We have a lot of people who are tithers. I know all of our primary leaders are, but as a congregation we’re not following God’s plan. Should we expect God to bless our church if we’re not trusting and obeying Him?

I’m not trying to embarrass or shame anyone. I want you to be blessed. I want you to enjoy all of the promises of God. I would be failing you if I didn’t teach this “if then” principle.

Learn this: God’s promises come with a caveat. If we’re faithful to God, including in how we give to His cause, then He will be faithful with His promises. Be faithful to God in all things and you’ll enjoy His response.

Let me share one more idea and we’ll stop for today. I know I’ve told this story before but it is so very poignant I’ll share it again. It may be true or it may be a parable, I don’t know for sure.

A preacher preached about tithing. One very wealthy man took the preacher aside and said, *I believe what you said today, and I agree with you. But you need to realize. I make a lot of money and a tithe would be a LOT of money for me*.

* The preacher said, *I understand. That is significant. How about we pray about it*?
* So the preacher put his hand on the man’s shoulder and prayed:

*Father in Heaven. You know this man’s heart and You know his wealth. You know he wants to be faithful to Your Word but it would be an awful lot for him to give a tithe. Would You please reduce his income so he can afford to tithe faithfully*?

Let me ask, if God blessed you according to how you respond to His definition of “*fair share*”, would your income rise or fall?

The tithe is God’s idea. That’s what He thinks is our “*fair share*”.

* Are you giving your “*fair share*” to God’s work?
* What if God decided to allow you to determine how much income you should get based on how much you “tithe”?
* What if your giving came first and then God determined from that how much to bless you?

God wants to bless you. If you trust and obey Him in all things including tithing, then He will bless you.