**Just OK?**

Show clips of commercials, “Just OK is not OK”

Just OK is not OK! I get that. I don’t want my dentist to be just OK. I don’t want to own a car that’s just OK. When we go out to eat I don’t want a meal that is just OK. I so appreciate the men and women who do communion meditations, that they’re not just OK. They all provide thoughtful carefully prepared messages. Just OK is not OK.

I don’t think Jesus is OK with just OK either. I don’t think Jesus is satisfied with us when we do or be just enough to be saved. I think Jesus expects something more.

He made clear from the beginning of His ministry that He expects our righteousness to go beyond simply believing that He is the Savior. Just OK is not OK. In His first public sermon Jesus advanced what it means to be God’s people far beyond what the Law required.

*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not murder, and anyone who murders will be subject to judgment.” But* (Just OK is not OK). *I tell you that anyone who is angry with his brother will be subject to judgment.* Matthew 5:21f

*You have heard that it was said, “Do not commit adultery.” But* (Just OK is not OK). *I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart.* Matthew 5:27f

*You have heard that it was said to the people long ago, “Do not break your oath.” But* (Just OK is not OK). *I tell you, let your “Yes” be “Yes,” and your “No,” “No”* Matthew 5:33f, 37

*You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth.”But* (Just OK is not OK). *I tell you, if someone strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also*. Matthew 5:38f

*You have heard that it was said, “Love your neighbor and hate your enemy.” But* (Just OK is not OK). *I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.* Matthew 5:43f

*Be careful not to do your “acts of righteousness” before men, to be seen by them.* Matthew 6:1

*When you pray, do not be like the hypocrites, to be seen by men.* *When you pray, go into your room, close the door and pray to your Father, who is unseen.* Matthew 6:5f

Jesus consistently taught a higher standard for His followers than did other religions, including Judaism. He called for greater faithfulness, greater sacrifice, greater commitment, and greater endurance.

Last week we began talking about our tithes and offerings, what we give of our wealth to God’s mission. We focused on the promise God made,

*Honor the Lord with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.* Proverbs 3:9f

That promise written in His Word for all to see, has not aged out. It was valid in 700 BC and it’s valid today. If we’re generous givers to God’s mission, He will bless us with more blessings than we can even calculate.

This morning I’ll talk about the tithe as a standard of giving. We don’t teach this often because preachers don’t like to talk about money at church. Also, I know most people would prefer to be willfully blind to what God says about giving, hoping that they’ll be OK not knowing. But just OK is not OK.

Tithe is the concept of giving 10% of wealth to God’s mission in response to His love. It’s a concept as old as man. Nearly every ancient culture used 10% as the standard for religious giving. To tithe means to give 10%.

As I said last week only 5% of Christians in America give a tithe. Many have never been taught what the Bible says. Most have but they refuse to accept it.

The last book in the Old Testament, Malachi, speaks very specifically about the tithe, calling out believers who don’t give a tithe. Not tithing was not OK to Malachi. He accused the people of God of “robbing” God. *Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How do we rob you?” In tithes and offerings.* Malachi 3:8

He used a very rare word, “*qaba*” variously translated rob, or defraud. It comes from a word that means to come up on a man from behind. So although in this context “defraud” makes sense, I think that’s too soft. I think it’s more along the idea of someone sneaking upon a man from behind, whacking him with a club, and taking his money. Malachi charged the people for strong armed robbery of God.

He couldn’t have said it more clearly. Not tithing is stealing from God. Tithing leads to God blessing beyond our capacity to contain. 95% of Christians don’t believe that.

I have heard plenty of times, *I don’t have to tithe because nowhere in the New Testament does it say*. Listen, if you’re only doing what you have been specifically told to do, you’re just OK.

But I ask, why does something have to be repeated in the New Testament in order to be valid? Do you remember how God, after the great flood promised that He would never again destroy the earth is such a way? God said,

*This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and every living creature with you, a covenant for all generations to come: I have set my rainbow in the clouds, and it will be the sign of the covenant between me and the earth…I will remember my covenant between me and you and all living creatures of every kind. Never again will the waters become a flood to destroy all life.* Genesis 9:12f, 15

That promise didn’t get repeated in the New Testament yet we still believe it. If we believe that promise without reiteration, why don’t we believe His promise in Malachi?

Why do we say, *If Jesus didn’t restate it in the New Testament, it’s not valid for us?* Why do we think that since it doesn’t say in the New Testament, “*You must give a tithe*”, that the tithe is no longer a fair standard?

10% is actually just a starting point for giving. In the Old Testament, the tithe is specifically distinguished from offerings. In fact Malachi mentioned tithes and offerings. The tithe was expected, required. Offerings were above and beyond the tithe.

I’ll postulate four benefits of tithing.

**One**. Tithing is a way for us to express love for God. By tithing we proclaim that we understand that He is the source of all blessings and we’re giving like He gives.

**Two**. Tithing releases blessings. After calling the people out for not giving the tithe Malachi wrote*, Bring the whole tithe into the*

*storehouse. 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. Malachi 3:10*

Think about that. God says, *if you don’t believe me, test me*. It amazes me that God would invite us to text Him. Not that He won’t prove Himself, but it opens the door for abuse, but that’s what He said. *Try me!*

Don’t be foolish. This test isn’t about putting money in the offering plate and waiting for cash to come rolling in. It’s not about how much money you can realize. It’s not about your financial gratification. This is about getting on board with God’s mission. It’s about supporting God’s work through your church or the missions you support.

There’s no reason to think that what God offered to the people in Malachi’s time He doesn’t offer to us today. Try it. Spend some time in prayer asking God to show you the ministry He wants you to be involved with, then give generously. See for yourself if He will bless you.

**Three**. The third benefit is that tithing expands God’s ministry. God has already made available to His people all the resources necessary to carry out His mission. The reasons some ministries and mission struggle is because God’s people don’t trust Him, so they don’t tithe.

Let’s do some math. We have about 100 families that regularly worship at Agape Christian Church. Suppose each family earned $40,000 a year. That’s a $400,000 yearly offering. Our total budget is $366,000. We’d be well over budget.

We know that many of our families have income far surpassing $40,000.

Do you see the point? God has a plan that will easily cover the expenses of His mission. He blesses people with enough money that no one has to be overburdened. Sadly, too many people keep that money for themselves ignoring God’s plan. The result is that His missions struggle.

**Four**. Tithing changes your spending habits.

My parents taught me to tithe from my earliest days. If I got money for my birthday, I tithed. When I shoveled the neighbor’s snow and they paid me, I tithed. I learned that if I’m going to afford the tithe, I better not spend all the money first. That’s why the Bible refers to our giving as “firstfruits”.

Taking care of your tithe first will cause you to prioritize. The discipline of tithing helps you resist materialism because you evaluate your money, prioritize your spending and weekly offering. You also find yourself wasting much less and saving much more.

With the discipline of tithing you’ll learn to determine what is “need” and what is “want”. You’ll learn to make choices that benefit your whole life, not just the moment.

I almost stopped this sermon right here, but I knew you’d be disappointed because you want to learn more. So allow me to speak about the other side of giving, that of not giving, especially not giving a tithe.

Malachi, speaking for God accused the people of stealing from Him. *You rob me. By not bringing the tithes and offerings, you steal from me!* We didn’t read verse 9 so let’s do that now.

*You are under a curse, the whole nation of you, because you are robbing me.* Malachi 3:9

The Hebrew of this verse is poignant. *You are cursed with a curse*. He used a verb “cursed”, a word with the common understanding like casting a spell. He also used a noun “curse” indicating an affliction of some sort.

Israel got themselves in trouble several hundred years earlier by not obeying so God cursed, allowing them to be overrun by Babylon and then Persia. Eventually they were allowed to return to their land and rebuild the nation but they hadn’t learned.

Now, newly re-established in their homeland they still didn’t do what God said. In chapter 2 Malachi had already spoken of this curse,

“*If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name,” says the Lord Almighty, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me”.* Malachi 2:2

What follows is a description of society that has rejected God’s ways in favor of their own feel good ideas:

* They remained a small and unimpressive nation.
* The promised glories were not realized.
* They didn’t experience the presence of God in worship.
* Their society degenerated:
	+ Sons became rebellious against their fathers
	+ People became disrespectful of worship
	+ Divorce was rampant
	+ They praised those who do evil saying that God is pleased with them.

That all sounds so familiar, like the evening news.

The Bible records other curses by God:

* The ground was cursed for Adam so that he would have to work hard to produce.
* Cain was cursed for murdering his brother resulting in Cain becoming homeless.
* In Genesis 12 God warned that He would curse anyone who hassled Abraham.
* In Deuteronomy 27 & 28, many centuries before this stuff in Malachi, God warned that people who refused to obey Him He would curse with problems in child-bearing, poor crops, dying cattle.

Here’s where I’m going with this. Our daily life situations that we consider “troubles” today may actually be the result of a curse:

* Broken marriages
* Failing businesses
* Crop failure
* Destructive weather
* Loss of authority in the land
* Failing churches

Those may be God’s response to our failure.

If there is an area of your life in which you are continually knocked down, whatever that might be, maybe God is trying to get your attention. Maybe you’re not truly following God. Just OK is not OK. You might be living under a curse.

Maybe God is focused on the area of your giving. That was the issue for the people of Malachi’s time. They ignored the tithe and were cursed for it.

Maybe the problem is that God is low on your priority list instead of first. Maybe you’re under a curse because you don’t tithe. Maybe you give enough to be OK, but just OK is not OK.

On the other hand look at how God blesses those who obey and follow Him:

*Blessed are all who fear the Lord, who walk in His ways. You will eat the fruit of your labor; blessings and prosperity will be yours. Your wife will be like a fruitful vine within your house; your sons will be like olive shoots around your table. Thus is the man blessed who fears the Lord*. Psalm 128:1-4

Some of those images aren’t as meaningful to us as to ancient Israel, but if you read them with a poet’s mindset they describe blessings.

*The blessing of the Lord brings wealth, and He adds no trouble to it.* Proverbs 10:22

God has blessings ready to give out to people who will recognize Him as God and follow His ways. He wants to give prosperous businesses, happy successful marriages, joyful parent child relationships, long life, and strength for tough times.

Just OK is not OK, not because God is destitute and needs money, but because God wants to bless us beyond what He has already given us. As Jesus said, the measure we use in our giving is the measure He uses in blessings.

An old Nigerian proverb reminds us, “*It’s the heart that gives, the fingers just let go*.” Giving is never about how much we have. Giving is always about our hearts. Like the woman Jesus watched give two small copper coins and declared that she put in a greater offering than all the rich people (Luke 21:1-4).

On average an American is exposed to over 300 advertisements every day. Try this: count the number in your favorite magazine. They hijack your concentration. Calculate the percentage of television time is commercials convincing you that you need a super weight-loss method;

* investment advice from this guy who cares only about you;
* a new truck;
* pizza with cheese in the crust;
* beer with 1/3 the calories.

Like smart bombs they explode in your mind: You deserve better.

Commercials and ads stimulate our curiosity, massage our yearnings, tickle our anticipation, and create one of the biggest obstacles to tithing – discontent.

Discontent generates restless desire for more, bigger, better. Over 300 times each day the forces of advertisement declare that we don’t have enough, undermining our sense of security and happiness.

Someone asked John D. Rockefeller, *How much does it take to satisfy a man*? With great wisdom he replied, *A little bit more*.

It not because people can’t afford it that they don’t give a tithe. It’s because of discontent. They don’t have enough and giving 10% away means they’ll have even less.

I’m not suggesting that we should sell our possessions and become minimalists. It’s OK to own things, even lots of things. It a problem when things own us.

God asks for a tithe as an expression of our love for and trust in Him. When we don’t bring in the whole tithe we are under the curse of greed and selfishness. When we do tithe, God blesses.

If you don’t believe me, give it a try. Bring in the whole tithe, *see if God will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.*