Devotion

Four Ds of Financial Blessing:

Malachi 3:1-17
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Wesley J. Gabel

This past month we've looked at the Bible and financial blessing. We've observed that our finances are affected by more than our choices. For example, the fact that the average pig in Indiana is better fed and sheltered than much of the human race suggests that our communities, as well as our families, are conduits of God's blessing and Satan's curses. We do reap what others sew.

In the Bible, we learn that the path to financial blessing traverses difficulties. Abraham, Jacob, Joseph, and David, for example, gained, lost and regained enormous wealth. Each experienced financial blessing in implementing four principles that start with the letter D. Each was **diligent** in their responsibilities working with all their heart for the glory of God. Each was **discerning** in setting goals, constructing plans and purposefully using their time, money and energy. Each was **disciplined**. They kept their focus despite obstacles and temptations.

However, one more dimension permeated their decisions and actions. Each was **devoted** to God. Each lived in covenant with and submission to the Creator. This last aspect is most critical. Certainly, without diligence, discernment and discipline, we are improper subjects for financial blessings; however, it is devotion, more than any other thing, the Bible points to.

The problem is that we confuse deference with devotion. In deference we give polite respect. We adjust our activity in deference. In deference the Israelites offered sacrifices and

worshiped God. They observed festivals and occasions. Today, in deference people give Jesus and his church a role in their lives. They confess faith in Jesus and worship him in ways that are comfortable for them. All this is deference. However, in devotion we vow our lives to Jesus. We weigh every word of God to see how we can carry out His will; for we live for him. In deference we hope not to offend. In devotion, we aim to please. In deference we attend to God as much as we judge necessary. In devotion: "to live is Christ and to die is gain!"

I've discovered that no relationship thrives on deference. No spouse is looking day to day for deference. We do not grow from polite respect and actions measured not to offend. It is devotion, not deference, that communicates how important someone is to us, how much we love them. We love God only if we are devoted to knowing and pleasing God.

In Malachi 3, we discover that Israelites who claimed devotion to God actually acted in deference. Their true devotion was indicated by practices such as exploiting employees and taking advantage of people for financial gain, pursuing self-serving justice and operating sexually and spiritually in disobedience to the teaching of God. So even while they thought God would answer their prayers and honor their piety, they were heaping judgment on themselves. Indeed, what commanded their attention were their own desires and what would best serve them immediately. God's will did not command their attention, so how could they be devoted?

As long as God's word fits with what we like or want, we're devoted. However, that is not devotion. At best it is deference. The test of our devotion is when what God says and wants gets in the way of our selfish impulses and pursuits. Then what gives way?

The Prophet Malachi confronted the people of Israel with their self-deception. They weren't fooling God, and they wouldn't like his response if He actually visited them. Despite all of their religious observances, their everyday actions were distrustful. Indeed, whatever their

rationalizations, they were disobedient. They gave money to God, but not if it got in the way of other priorities and passions. They did what anyone might do out of deference. Consequently, their actions defamed God. They said God's word is worthless. It is not to be trusted.

Malachi said that the people of God are under a curse. Their work lacked the blessing and protection of God. God so desired to bless them, that his blessings were held back by floodgates.

Parents, have you ever felt that way about a child. Have you held back some blessing for a time because it wasn't wise? One day I bought a Nintendo controller for one of my children. The child wanted it, but I held it back and kept it hidden. I waited and waited for an opportunity when it would actually bless the child. Truthfully, I could have broken down; but I knew that I needed to stay firm. Now listen to Malachi:

> ***"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."*** (Malachi 3:10, NIV)

God pleads with Israel to return the full tithe, ten percent of their income, so that He can justly bless them. We can understand this even better if we reflect again on our parenting.

My standards and expectations for my children are different than for other children. I am parenting with a hope for certain outcomes. I care for others, but not with the same relationship or expectations. Thus, I discipline my children; but in most cases, I leave other children to the discretion of their parents.

When you and I commit ourselves to Jesus, we enter a special relationship with God, much as Israel has. The Apostle Paul says that we are spiritual children of Abraham. Thus, God deals with us differently than if we were not his children and not his representatives on earth. God won't let you get away with things that he tolerates in others. You are a holy people, and

you are to act holy. You will be blessed in your devotion and disciplined in your disobedience. All of this flows out of God's love for you and the children he wants to love through you. Thus, if you are in covenant with God, your experience of life and financial blessing will be quite different than others.

Jesus told his followers:

> ***Seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*** (Matthew 6:33-34, NIV)

Jesus, talking about money and financial provision, calls his followers to devotion. We are, first and foremost, about God's rule and will. We devote our lives to Christ. As Joshua challenged all of Israel: "Choose this day whom you will serve. As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord." We are talking devotion, not deference. Only God is God. Only God is worthy of your trust and complete devotion. In him, you can be devoted to your mate. In him, you can be devoted in service. In him, you can be devoted to love for one another. However, devotion that brings life is devotion to God who reaches out to you in Jesus Christ.

How then can you tell that you are acting in devotion? First, are you paying attention to God? What role does his word play in your daily life? Second, do you act in trust? Do you aim to fulfill his word and please him? Do you seek his rule in your life and in your community? Third, do you show devotion and trust with your finances? Returning a tithe is a sign of trust and partnership with God. However, some are wealthy enough to return a tithe in deference rather than devotion. If that is the case, your tithe may not be enough. Like the rich young ruler who turned away from Jesus, you may need to surrender everything.

Whatever the case, if you haven't begun to tithe, I encourage you to begin today. Make a commitment right now; and as you go to the Lord in communion, seek forgiveness for your unbelief and strength to live as God's holy child.