

### **Malachi 3:7-12**

<sup>7</sup> Ever since the time of your ancestors,  
you have deviated from my laws  
and have not kept them.

Return to me and I will return to you,  
says the Lord of heavenly forces.

But you say, "How should we return?"

<sup>8</sup> Should a person deceive God?  
Yet you deceive me.

But you say, "How have we deceived you?"

With your tenth-part gifts and offerings.

<sup>9</sup> You are being cursed with a curse,  
and you, the entire nation, are robbing me.

<sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tenth-part to the storage house so there might be food in my house.  
Please test me in this,

says the Lord of heavenly forces.

See whether I do not open all the windows of the heavens for you  
and empty out a blessing until there is enough. <sup>[a]</sup>

<sup>11</sup> I will threaten the one who wants to devour you  
so that it doesn't spoil the fruit of your fertile land,  
and so that the vine doesn't abort its fruit in your field,

says the Lord of heavenly forces.

<sup>12</sup> All the nations will consider you fortunate,  
for you will be a desirable land,  
says the Lord of heavenly forces.

### **2 Corinthians 9:7-12**

<sup>7</sup> Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver. <sup>8</sup> God has the power to provide you with more than enough of every kind of grace. That way, you will have everything you need always and in everything to provide more than enough for every kind of good work. <sup>9</sup> As it is written, *He scattered everywhere; he gave to the needy; his righteousness remains forever.* <sup>[a]</sup> <sup>10</sup> The one who supplies seed for planting and bread for eating will supply and multiply your seed and will increase your crop, which is righteousness. <sup>11</sup> You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous in every way. Such generosity produces thanksgiving to God through us. <sup>12</sup> Your ministry of this service to God's people isn't only fully meeting their needs but it is also multiplying in many expressions of thanksgiving to God.

### **John 8:31-36**

<sup>31</sup> Jesus said to the Jews who believed in him, "You are truly my disciples if you remain faithful to my teaching. <sup>32</sup> Then you will know the truth, and the truth will set you free."

<sup>33</sup> They responded, "We are Abraham's children; we've never been anyone's slaves. How can you say that we will be set free?"

<sup>34</sup> Jesus answered, "I assure you that everyone who sins is a slave to sin. <sup>35</sup> A slave isn't a permanent member of the household, but a son is. <sup>36</sup> Therefore, if the Son makes you free, you really will be free.

## **Sermon**

Grace to you and peace from God our Creator, our Resurrected Lord Jesus Christ, and the Holy Spirit: Amen.

I can already hear the questions that might be floating around the room, because they're filling my head to the brim as well. How is he going to weave a Reformation sermon into the conclusion of the stewardship series? Especially when we've already talked about time and talent, so we're left with treasure, with money. Especially when Luther's reformation included a clear condemnation of the selling of indulgences and a criticism of the church's opulence? I'm going to do this the same way that you change a cheetah's diaper. Very carefully. And I'm going to do it by asking two simple questions: What belongs to us? What belongs to God?

Of course, what we've been talking about for the last few weeks is a reformation of sorts. We're talking about

reforming our stewardship models, about looking at our time, talents, and treasures as ways to share God's kingdom with the world. We're confronted with the reality that everything in our possession doesn't actually belong to us, but instead comes to us as gifts from God. That's why it's called stewardship. We are stewards of things that don't belong to us and called to distribute these things to the world on God's behalf.

Our first reaction this message can often be denial, or at least disappointment. We like things. We like having things and owning things. Whether it's our calendar or our wallet or our ability to juggle bowling pins, we like to control our time, talent, and treasure. And there's the rub. The real issue we have with stewardship is that we want control. We want to be the God of our wallet, the God of our calendar, the God of our skills. So when stewardship talk reminds us

that we're not God of, well, anything, we react in negative ways because we feel obligated to control our own lives.

But what if stewardship was about liberation from that obligation? Each of the last two weeks I've said that stewardship is about prioritizing our lives, about putting our time, talent, and treasure into context with the values of God's kingdom. As stewardship does this, we're liberated from the need to control our lives, because the resurrection of Jesus reshapes our priorities. Stewardship frees us from the burden of being a failing demigod who can't seem to pay all the bills, find time for a nap, or use our skills for something good, and instead allows us to become what we were created to be. Friends of God, freed by Jesus to share whatever we have, whether little or much, for the greatness of God's kingdom.

In his book *the Freedom of a Christian*, Martin Luther said the following about Christians: We are perfectly free,

servants of none. We are perfectly bound, servants of all. In other words, in relation to sin we are absolutely free. There is no obligation on us whatsoever to make up for the sinfulness in our lives, because Jesus Christ did that on the cross and in the empty tomb. So that sinful push to be the deities of our lives is not only already forgiven, but we no longer need to submit to that lie. We no longer need to think that way. We no longer need to believe this stuff belongs to us, because that really means we just belong to our stuff. Just as John's Gospel tells us, Jesus makes us free, and so we are indeed free from sin and the consequences of sin that make us think this world is a world of scarcity. It is a world of abundance based in the grace of God.

Because we are free from sin, we are bound to God in Christ as servants to God's creation. As people freed from the bondage of sin, we're given responsibility as stewards of God's grace. Grace that we find in the time we're given

each day. Grace that we find in the talents we're born with and the skills we develop throughout our lives. Grace that we find in the treasures we receive in this world. We've received grace upon grace from the God that delivered us from sin. In Jesus Christ, that God showed us another way to live, so we're called to share that grace throughout our lives. We're called to share the abundance that God's placed in our care. To become good stewards of God's grace is God's reformation of our identities, from sinners into saints, false God's into children of God, from estranged creatures to friends of our creator.

One of the children of the Reformation, Karl Barth, wrote that the church ought always be, and get ready for your Latin lesson for the year, "*ecclesia reformata, semper reformanda.*" This means that the church should be reformed and always reforming. Simply put, the work of God is never done within us! God is always reforming us into

reflections of Christ, images of the Lord, children of the King. This is why stewardship is so central to our lives as Christians. If God is constantly reforming us, we must constantly be considering how we might become better stewards. We've talked about time, and we've talked about talent, so that leaves us with everyone's favorite topic, treasure. Money. Straight cash, homie.

Today's readings from Micah and 2 Corinthians give us two remarkably different approaches to giving our resources back to God. The reading from Micah is one of those Scriptures that jars me out of the daily lull. God, who we're taught never to test, says to us, "Test me on this." God confronts us with that culture of scarcity, where we try to hoard the resources in our care instead of sharing them with God's mission. Rather than punish us, God tells us share the gifts we've received and see what happens. God triple dog

dares us to try generosity and experience God's blessing on the other side.

On the other hand, 2 Corinthians says that "Everyone should give whatever they have decided in their heart. They shouldn't give with hesitation or because of pressure. God loves a cheerful giver." Rather than a dare to give at least the 10% tithe, this seems like an invitation to share whatever we're able to give cheerfully. Now, this doesn't just mean that we're emotionally happy to give it, because sometimes gifts require sacrifices. What Paul's getting at here is that we're called to give out of our commitment to the Gospel as a reflection of the joy we've received because of our salvation.

Here's one key to remember. We're talking about generosity to God's mission in the world. This happens in many places, and not just this church! What we're talking about here is a culture of generosity, where we're

committed to the contagious spread of our vast abundance. Hear this clearly. You don't have to do all of your giving in church to be giving to the mission of God.

Here's the flipside of that coin. Whatever our future looks like together as CLC, our decisions about stewardship will shape that future. For the next two and a half years, we've got the redevelopment money committed to run our congregation at full time capacity, but we can't draw on our reserves forever. Our stewardship will soon come to define how what kind of staffing we can afford, what projects we can accomplish around the building, and most importantly what sorts of ministry we can take outside of this building to bless the New River Valley. Now, don't hear this as judgment, or condemnation, or demanding your money. This is just a piece of honesty about the life of our community, and of any church community. God blesses us with the resources at our disposal. The shape of our

community and our ability to do ministry depends on the ways we steward those resources.

That's the beauty we find in the juxtaposition of these two scriptures. God lays before us a compassionate challenge, telling us that we shouldn't give out of peer pressure, but cheerfully, because God wants to work through our resources to bless us and the world in ways that we can't even imagine yet. When God puts before us the challenge of stewardship, it's not about bringing us pain. It's about opening up the potential of an incredible future for us. That's why our joy in giving matters more than the amount that we give. Stewardship is about God blessing the world through the blessings God shared with us. Of course we ought to find joy in giving toward that good work!

Luther once wrote, "I have held many things in my hands and lost them all, but whatever I have placed in God's hands, that I still possess." Think about that, and how

true it is. No matter what we try to hoard, we eventually lose it. We dip in to our savings to fix the broken cars that we eventually get rid of. The things that we buy because we think they'll make us happy end up as the latest and greatest items at our next yard sale. The stocks that we buy literally disappear before our eyes. All the things that we try to hold in our our hands, we eventually lose.

But what we return into God's hands becomes a part of the greater mission of the church. As put put our time and talents and treasure toward the mission of God, we as the people of God continue to partner with that mission. The richness of God's service becomes the treasure that we share. The depth of God's mercy becomes the trajectory of our talent. The hope of God's Kingdom, where death has lost its power and sin has lost its sting and we're all blessed as children of God – no matter the color of our skin or the

language that we speak or any other separating factor – that consumes all of our time.

As we give to God through stewardship of time, talent, and treasure, we possess even more as the Body of Christ. We possess a future based not in our acquisition of stuff but based in our sharing of the gifts God first shared with us. We possess the opportunity to live lives not based on what we have but based in what was first given to us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Stewardship, the act of seeing everything we have as God's and sharing everything we have with God's mission, liberates us from a life of acquiring stuff and into a life of acquiring God's kingdom, a life of becoming Christ's body, a life that is truly Christ's life in the here and now. That's what stewardship is like. That's what sharing our gifts is like. It's giving up the selfishness that binds us to dissatisfaction and embracing the certainty that, with God, there is always, always, always

enough. What belongs to us? What belongs to God? That's the core question of our stewardship lives together. The more that we believe everything belongs to God, the more we know that our future is certain in Christ. Amen.