

Will He Find Faith On Earth?

A sermon by Ted Atkinson, Minister, Oxford Presbyterian Church, Oxford, PA on the twentieth Sunday after Pentecost, October 22, 1995. Scripture Lessons: Jeremiah 31:27-34; Psalm 119:97-104; 2 Timothy 3:14-4:5; Luke 18:1-8.

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

I got fired from my church in 1968. I was a fiery seminary intern at the Olivet-Ashbourne Presbyterian Church in Philadelphia. I preached a controversial sermon. After the sermon an elder stood up and called for a special session meeting to which I was invited. At that meeting I received the news that I was canned because of the sermon. Today's sermon may be as controversial.

Obedience to God's law expresses itself, in part, through tithing. God's law requires his people to tithe their income. The Old Testament is very clear. Jesus assumes it in the New Testament. God commands his people to tithe. In an agricultural society it was one lamb out of ten. One cow in ten. One tenth of your grain. In our society it's one tenth of our pay-check. Obedience to God's law expresses itself in tithing.

Faith in Jesus Christ also expresses itself in tithing. Don't misunderstand. We aren't put right with God by the money we give. We're justified by grace through faith. It's a free gift. But faith expresses itself in the way we use our money. For example, Jesus once asked his disciples, "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth?" In other words, "Will I find a faithful people." ^{Will I find them praying for justice. Seeking justice} Will I find my people using their money to feed the hungry, cloth the naked, visit prisoners, preach the gospel and teach my Word? Or will I find my people accumulating more and more of this world's goods?" That's what he meant when

he asked, "Will the Son of Man find faith on earth?" We express our obedience and faith, in part, when we tithe.

Many Presbyterians don't know that faith and obedience expresses itself in tithing. They don't know because nobody tells them. Ministers fear we'll get fired if we meddle in the sacred and private matter of how to use our money. But you need to know. The Lord wants us to tithe.

Most of us don't need more faith to tithe. We need more obedience. If we're making \$50,000 a year we don't need more faith to tithe. We need the will to obey. We need to change priorities in how we use money. Now if we're a single parent raising a child on \$15,000 a year we need faith to tithe. But many of us don't need more faith. We need the will to obey God's will.

Let's say you want to obey and step out on faith. So you ask, "How should I figure a tithe? On my income before or after taxes?" Here's a simple answer: What if you're offered a new job? Your new employer says, "I'll give you ten percent more than what you now get. What do you make?" What figure would you give? Base your tithe on that figure.

Now what would happen if all of us gave a major portion of our tithe to the church? The various committees of the session have developed a prayerful budget based on our understanding of the ministry God's wants to accomplish through our church. This week you'll receive a copy of the proposed church budget for 1996. The budget is \$219,000. That figure would be surpassed easily if God's people gave only a portion of their tithe. Our

official membership is about 480 people. We all know really active members are far less - maybe 200 members. Here's how 200 members can meet the budget. Fifty people need to give at least \$500 each. Now it's hard for me to imagine many people unable to give \$500. Take my mother for an example. She died several years ago. She was a widow for nearly 30 years. Lived on a pension. Never received more than \$7000. Out of that money she paid her utilities. She bought food. She paid taxes. She maintained a home. She bought clothes. She travelled to Maine, South Dakota and California. She ate out from time to time. And she pledged over \$500 to St Andrew's Presbyterian Church in Newark where she belonged. What I'm saying is - many widows and elderly people can give at least \$500. Many retired people can give at least \$500 and many can give far more. Some teenagers can give \$500. If 50 people contributed \$500 each, that would amount to \$25,000. In order to meet our budget a hundred people need to give at least \$1000. Frankly, I can't imagine many members of our church unable to give \$1000. A thousand dollars is one tenth of \$10,000. Most families in our church make more than \$10,000 a year. Young married couples fresh out of college should be able to contribute at least \$1000. Parents with children in college should be able to contribute \$1000. Many couples living on a single income can give at least \$1000. If 100 members contributed \$1000 each that would generate \$100,000 for the work of our church. Another 50 need to give \$5000 each. People who make more than \$50,000 a year should be able to contribute \$5000 a year. I'm sure at least 50 members make

\$50,000 a year or more. If 50 people would pledge \$5000 that would be \$250,000. That's more than our entire prayerful budget. We'd have enough to finish the sanctuary. If just 200 of our 480 members gave a portion of their tithe we would surpass our budget.

It's fair to ask me how much I give to the church. After all, ministers should lead by example when it comes to giving. Therefore you need to know how much I give. My pledge for this year (1995) is \$3,400. That's less than a tithe of my income. Now understand that we have three teenage sons to put through college. We paid over \$1000 in medical deductibles this year. We pay a mortgage. We pay utility bills. We maintain a home. We make car payments. We take vacations. Several years ago Kay and I vacationed for a week in Bermuda. We eat out every once in a while - not as often as we'd like. We have a little money saved. What I'm saying is this - an average family can live a full life and still contribute two or three thousand dollars a year to the work of Christ's church.

But maybe you don't give the major portion of your tithe, not because you don't know what the Bible says about tithing, but because your unhappy about the church. Dissatisfaction with the church may be one reason people don't tithe. If you're unhappy with the church you need to seek ways to reform the church according to your understanding of God's Word. The Presbyterian church encourages that kind of reform. If that fails and you're still unhappy you need to find another church. You have lots of churches to choose from. Lots of denominations. Don't use

disatisfaction with the church as an excuse for not giving. Find a church where you can cheerfully tithe. The Oxford Presbyterian Church isn't a perfect church - not as long as I'm your minister it won't be. We're not a perfect church but I believe we're a faithful church. And when the Son of Man returns he'll find find on earth, in part, because of the ministry of this church.

When we don't support the ministry of the church through our tithes and offerings the work of Christ suffers. We lose heart. We stop praying. Faith dries up. A few weeks ago I was talking with colleagues in ministry. One minister said his session recently discussed their financial woes. Everybody was losing heart. One of the elders said, "We need somebody to die and leave us a big gift." Another elder responded, "That already happened 2000 years ago."

Two thousand years ago Jesus died and gave us a big gift. He justified us by grace through faith. He set us free to accept ourselves and to love God and our neighbors. He gives us courage to pray without ceasing. He gives us courage to witness among all peoples to Christ as Lord and Savior. He gives us courage to unmask the idolatry of money. He gives us courage to work with others for justice, freedom, and peace. Jesus died and gave us a big gift. Love so amazing, so divine demands, our souls, our lives, our all.

Let us pray: Lord, tireless guardian of your people, ever prepared to hear the cries of your chosen ones, teach us to rely, day and night, on your care. Support our prayer, lest we grow weary. Drive us to seek your enduring justice and your ever-present help. Grant this through your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you in the unity of the Holy Spirit. Amen.