

25th Sunday in Ordinary Time, C – September 22, 2019 – Very Rev. Bryan W. Jerabek, J.C.L.
Cathedral of St. Paul, Birmingham, AL – 5pm Vigil, 8:30 & 11am Sunday Masses – 1,070 words

“You cannot serve God and mammon”; oh, but we cannot live in this world without having contact with mammon – that is, with money and possessions. What this teaching must mean, then, is that we are to order these things aright within our relationship with God. If we would offer him fitting service, there is no room for dishonesty – for the sleights of hand, cheating, and mental reservations spoken of in both the first reading and the gospel, that flow from a disordered desire to hold onto money and things. “No servant can serve two masters; he will either hate one or love the other, or be devoted to one and despise the other”: we must strive to have a holy hatred – a detachment – for and from all the things of this world. And that means, in practice, that we should manage them in the context of our love of God.

Historically and traditionally, the way to situate finances and possessions within a loving relationship with God was to always offer him the first fruits. Near the beginning of the book of Genesis, Cain and Abel were invited to make such an offering to the Lord: one did so generously and properly; the other did not offer his best.¹ But later there arose the concept of tithing: we see this with Abraham, who gave a tenth of all he had to Melchizedek, king of Salem and priest of the Most High.² The tithe was understood to be the first 10%, owed to God: the other 90% could be directed to the needs and wants of this world. The prophet Malachi has God even daring us as regards the tithe: “‘Try me in this,’ says the Lord, ‘and see if I will not open up the floodgates of heaven and pour out blessings upon you in abundance’.”³

I have never known of anyone who regretted tithing; much to the contrary, they have only verified the truth of the Lord’s dare through the prophet Malachi. In fact, I’ve heard very many stories of people who tithed but after did not technically have enough left to pay their bills or meet unexpected needs – yet, somehow, it all worked out. Stories of extraordinary blessings received have also been touching. They certainly strengthen one’s faith in miracles. And I have heard such accounts from some of you, who practice this biblical discipline. But some, when they hear of tithing, do not have such a positive reaction: “that’s what Protestants do”; “the Church just wants more of my money”; or perhaps, “but Christ did away with tithing”. Indeed, the question arises, does the Church really teach tithing? Is this discipline required of Catholics?

Tithing is mentioned in the New Testament, but not how we might expect. In Matthew 23 we read, “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, you hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, but neglect the weightier matters of the law...”⁴ Christ does not thereby condemn tithing, but he does imply that it is of no value if “justice and mercy and faith” are not attended to also. As St. Paul says in his famous hymn to charity, “If I give away all I have,... but have not love, I gain nothing.”⁵ Christians are called to a total conversion of life, and our giving to God is part of that. On the point of how much we should give, St. Paul simply says, “he who sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will reap bountifully. Each one must do as he decides, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.”⁶

So in the New Testament there is neither a condemnation nor an outright abrogation of the Old Testament precept of tithing; rather, the emphasis is on generosity with God within a coherent lifestyle lived in his service. And this is effectively what the Church has adopted as her

¹ Cf. Genesis 4:1-16.

² Cf. Genesis 14:18-20. There are many other Old Testament examples of tithing; this is but one example.

³ Malachi 3:10.

⁴ Matthew 23:23.

⁵ 1 Corinthians 13:3.

⁶ 2 Corinthians 9:6-8.

teaching. One of the “precepts” or commandments of the Church⁷ does bind us to support her in her needs – but the amount is left up to us. For example, the Code of Canon Law formulates this teaching as follows: “The Christian faithful are obliged to assist with the needs of the Church so that [she] has what is necessary for divine worship, for the works of the apostolate and of charity, and for the decent support of ministers. They are also obliged to promote social justice and, mindful of the precept of the Lord, to assist the poor from their own resources.”⁸

Today, it is especially important that parents hand this teaching on to their children; indeed, that you expect it of them. Maybe your son or daughter is in college and you give them a fixed allowance, or they have a work-study job that doesn’t pay much. No matter – they still have cash flow; they still have something to give God when they go to Mass. “Try me in this, says the Lord”! Maybe you have only recently entered the workforce and have student debt to pay off; the payments are high and things are tight. No matter – you have income, you still have something to offer to God. “Try me in this, says the Lord”! When we analyze our parish giving records,⁹ there is a notable lacuna: those who have gainful employment or some other source of income, yet seemingly do not give to the Church, in spite of our duty as Catholics to do so.

Jesus invites us to examine our priorities and our attachments. We live in comfortable times and can often find the cash to buy expensive coffees or fast food, to go to the movies and restaurants, to have the latest telephone and the streaming subscriptions. But if we are not giving to him, to God, in an intentional and structured manner – whether it’s one tenth of a percent or ten percent or some other amount – we will be found wanting. All that we have is his. He wants to be Lord of every part of our life – even our wallets! The second reading reminded us how much Christ gave – “he gave himself as a ransom for all”. Our life in Christ requires that we imitate him. As your pastor, I thank all who do give; I invite those who are not giving to start; and I invite us all (and that includes me!) to see if we cannot be even more generous.

⁷ Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church, nn. 2041-2043.

⁸ Code of Canon Law, canon 222 §§ 1 & 2.

⁹ I am not singling out this parish or anyone in particular; in fact, this a cultural problem of our time and affects many, if not most, parishes.