

TITLE: "What I Learned from Tithing"

TEXT: Malachi 3:10 (OT p. 890) - God says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing."

First, I want to talk about Veterans Day. ...The following is from an article titled "They Did What Had To Be Done" by Ralph Kinney Bennet (*Reader's Digest* 11/94 pp.13ff).

...Whenever I see veterans, I don't ask whether they were manning a machine gun or clerking in a supply depot. I just think to myself that while I grew up, went to school, raised a family, enjoyed the fruits and freedoms of the freest nation on earth, they were "there." They did what had to be done. Some sacrificed their lives, some their health. But all of them sacrificed time they could never make up.

Not long ago, I walked up the hill at Ligonier Valley Cemetery. The rows of graves look down on Loyalhanna Creek and beyond it, to the tree-shaded town. I drank in the beauty of it all—the flag waving over the square, the clock on the Methodist church, the school on the hill. Then I made a special point of going [to a gravestone].

It's inscribed simply: *Alvin P. Carey, 1916-1944, S/Sgt. 38 Inf 2nd Div.* When Alvin Carey's machine gun unit was pinned down near Plougastel, France, on a hot August day [65] years ago, he gathered as many grenades as he could and advanced alone 200 yards up a hill in the face of intense enemy fire. Despite mortal wounds, he destroyed a German pillbox, saving the lives of his men and allowing the position to be taken.

They tell me Alvin Carey was a stocky country boy, quiet and unassuming, just as ordinary a guy as anyone you might see hunting on chestnut ridge or shopping at the hardware store. But on that August day ...he did what had to be done.

Tears came to my eyes. I thought to myself: God bless every veteran. The ones at peace here. The ones I see marching in the next parade. The ones I pass unknowing on the street. From Yorktown to Gettysburg, from Plougastel to [Vietnam, Iraq and Afghanistan], they were there. They did what had to be done.

Now I want to talk about Stewardship

I have a cartoon before me. Two men, each holding a Bible and each dressed in nothing but polka dot boxer shorts are standing in front of their church. Each has a dazed expression on his face. One is saying to the other: "That was the best sermon on giving I've ever heard." [This COULD have been a case of two parishioners who misunderstood when their youth group sponsored an "Undy Sunday."]

Here's a little blurb from *Reader's Digest* (8/94 p.160) contributed by Kevin Wild:

During a sermon our pastor stated that money wasn't important in the afterlife because in heaven there is no money. I overheard one of the teenagers whisper to her mother, "Did you hear that, Mom? We're already in heaven."

I have a dilemma this morning. I want to preach the best sermon on giving you ever heard, but I know that it's like heaven right now and there is not a lot of money.

So, what I'm going to do is tell you what I have learned from tithing. What I've learned is simple:

When you tithe, you learn to trust God....

When you tithe, you learn how much God loves you....

Let me tell you a story, true story, titled "His Two Strips of Wheat." It's by Betty Munson. She and her husband are farmers (*Guideposts* 12/91, pp. 25ff). Their pastor had been preaching about tithing, giving 10% of their income to God.

But we still had plenty of questions about tithing. Because we were dry-land wheat farmers, half our ground was fallowed every summer to conserve the soil moisture in this northern Montana climate. Our income was determined by how well the crop did on the other half of our acreage, and on the fluctuating market prices. And of course the strength of the crop depended in most part on the weather.

Ten percent sounded like an awful lot, especially when we considered how rarely there was anything left over after we got done with all the bills. We just didn't see how we could swing it. Yet it seemed that God always provided for us no matter what we gave in return. We knew we could do more.

We decided we'd simply set aside part of our acreage. We called it crop-tithing. "I reckon two strips ought to be about right," Cliff calculated one day near the beginning of the year. A strip of wheat on our place is a half mile to a mile long—running north to south to protect the topsoil from the prevailing west winds—and maybe 18 rods wide, a rod being roughly 16 feet. In a good year we get a yield of 20 bushels or so per acre. We chose a couple strips on the east end of our producing land. "These two are yours, Lord," I said.

But then disaster struck, the kind of thing farmers have nightmares over. An early summer hailstorm cut and pounded our fledgling wheat crop into the ground. Wiped it out. The damage was total. We lost everything. Everything, that is, except those two strips on the east end, the ones we'd crop-tithed. They were unscathed.

Surveying the devastation, I felt the hurt lodge in my throat. I couldn't even cry. I was numb. What would we do now? We had no crop insurance. There would be no income for our family this year. None, unless we used those two remaining strips—two out of 30!—for ourselves.

"Well," sighed Cliff as we kicked through the broken stalks and brown puddles, "we promised those to God."

I nodded. "That still has to be our tithe," I agreed. "There's no going back on it that I can see."

From that July until the next harvest was the toughest financial time we ever had. It wore us down sometimes. But we started to learn to trust in God for every need, every problem. ...When harvest came that autumn it was a dark period. We cut the two strips, sent the wheat to market and gave the proceeds as our tithe, just as we'd pledged. It made no sense financially, but we couldn't break our bond.

We managed. Cliff went custom cutting that fall, which means hiring out your services to other farms. ...That winter, he worked repairing engines and machinery. The jobs always seemed to come when things looked particularly bleak.

Our local grocer was able to help out by letting us charge when we had to, but this year I couldn't bring myself to charge a turkey for Thanksgiving. It was not a strict necessity. I didn't even pray for a turkey. I just *yearned*. Then, on Christmas Eve, a friend showed up at the door with a big turkey as a bonus payment for some work Cliff had done. That turkey was the best-tasting bird we ever had.

The greatest blessing of all that year was not material. It was spiritual. God protected us from fear, from worry; for the more we trusted in God, the more our faith grew that the Lord would watch over us always. Those two tall strips of sturdy wheat that we crop-tithed, *they* sealed that trust.

That's what happens. Tithing SEALS our trust in God. You don't trust first and THEN tithe. You tithe when you're scared about money and then, when God provides, you start to trust God. When God provides for your needs, you start to realize, start to KNOW, how MUCH God loves you.

As those folks in the story found, it is not always easy. When I was in seminary, we were down to one can of beans; not pork and beans, plain no-name cut green beans. No money in my wallet and none in the bank. At that point I wondered why I had left my job as a purchasing manager to go to seminary. We just prayed.

That evening, the doorbell rang. A couple in our apartment building brought in several bags of groceries and a little cash collected from the other seminarians in the building. How did they know? "The Lord told us" they said.

What I learned from tithing is simple is what that framing couple learned:

When you tithe, you learn to trust God....

When you tithe, you learn how much God loves you....

Amen.