

Sermon for Sunday, June 11, 1978, by Andrew A. Jumper, D.D., Pastor
Central Presbyterian Church, St. Louis, Missouri

"TIPTOEING THROUGH THE TITHING"

Selected Portions Deuteronomy 26

Text: "Then you shall say before the Lord your God, 'I have removed the sacred portion out of my house...'" Deuteronomy 26:13a

Jesus said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get into heaven. By the standards of the world, you and I are rich. For that reason I think it my duty to warn you about the eye of that needle. Do you know what the eye of the needle meant in the times of Jesus? It seems that at night time, each city was surrounded by fortified walls for protection, and at night locked its gates. That was a simple matter to protect the city. But suppose that caravan, or even a lone camel master, has taken longer to reach the city than he thought. By the time he arrives, night has fallen and the gates are shut and locked. He calls out to the gate-keeper to open the gates and let him in. But suppose it is a ruse, a trick, to get the gates open, and then a large number of the enemy pours through the gate and the sleeping people are easy victims of such an attack. On the other hand, when there are bandits about, can you leave a poor traveler outside the protective walls of the city to be easy victims of bad robbers? So, a little door was cut into the big city gate. Only one person at a time could come through and it was so small and narrow that it was difficult to get through. If a man wanted to bring his camel in, he had to make the animal get on its knees, take all of his load off--take off his saddle, take off his packages, take off every burden because the camel couldn't get through with anything on. And then, with someone pulling at the camel's head maybe someone pushing from behind, they would slide the animal through the little door. Well, that sounds like a reasonable way to protect yourself from a surprise attack, and at the same time let fearful travelers into the safety of the city. Now, according to some scholars, that little door was called the eye of the needle. When Jesus said it was easier for a camel to get through the eye of the needle than a rich man to get into heaven, maybe he meant that the rich man doesn't want to strip himself of his possessions in order to get in. But that's the only way. As someone has said, you came into the world with nothing and you take nothing out with you. No, you have to go through the eye of the needle--you have to strip yourself of everything. And if you've got a lot of this world's goods, it's hard to let them go. Well, let me ask you this question: What is it worth to you to get into the kingdom of heaven? What would you be willing to strip yourself of--what would you be willing to give up, to get into God's kingdom? Would you empty your bank account? Sell your house? Dispose of your car? Do you begin to see why Jesus said it was so hard for a rich man to get into heaven?

Well, actually you don't have to do all of those things. You see, you couldn't buy your way into heaven even if you were willing to pay all you had. No, the only thing you have to give to Jesus is your heart. You have only to surrender your will to him and to make him the Lord of your life. That sounds pretty good doesn't it? It doesn't cost you anything--you don't have to sell anything or borrow any money at the bank to be a Christian. All you have to do is a simple little thing like give Jesus your heart and make him the Lord of your life.

Ah, but that's where the rub comes in! In the June issue of the Reader's Digest Orson Welles tells of being invited to a dinner party at the home of a movie producer when he was new in Hollywood. In the course of the evening, Welles began to tell one of his favorite stories and was telling it so well that everyone's attention was centered on him. Right in the middle of the story, he realized he had forgotten the punch line. "There I was," he said, "with the biggest stars of Hollywood looking attentively at me. In desperation I spoke directly to God; 'God, if you will get me out of this, I will never ask anything ever again!'" At that moment there was an earthquake and everyone ran out of the house for safety in case the walls fell. When the tremor had ended and everyone had gathered again, Mr. Welles said, "Well, there's no use trying to finish that story now." "That," he added, "was the last time I had the nerve to ask God for a favor!"

Well, that's the way it is with God. God takes us seriously. When we pray and ask for answers, God takes us seriously. When we commit our hearts to Jesus. God takes that seriously, too. So a little thing like making Jesus the Lord of our lives in order to have eternal life is something God takes seriously. And it seems obvious that if God takes it seriously, we had better do the same thing!

What does it mean to take God seriously? Well, if we try to live by his laws, that's taking God seriously. Are you doing that? Are you taking God seriously when it comes to his laws? Jesus says, "Think not that I have come to abolish the law and the prophets; I have come not to abolish them but to fulfill them. For truly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, not an iota, not a dot, will pass from the law..." (St. Matthew 5:17) Jesus says that if we are angry with our brother or insult him or call him a fool, we are breaking the law. Jesus says that if we look on another person with lust in our hearts, we are breaking the law. Jesus says that if somebody strikes us on one cheek we are to turn the other or we are breaking God's law. Jesus says to love our enemies, to visit the sick and the prisoners, to feed the hungry and clothe the naked. If we don't we are breaking God's law. So let me ask you, how is it with you and God's law?

Another way we take God seriously is to be grateful to him for his blessings. How are you showing your gratitude to God for what he has done for you? If being saved, if having eternal life, if going to heaven is the greatest thing that can happen to a man, let me ask you: how are you saying "thank you" to God? Do you remember our scripture for this morning? The Bible tells us that God gave the Israelites the promised land--a land flowing with milk and honey. As an expression of their gratitude for God's generosity, God told them to bring a tithe--ten percent--of their first-fruits as an offering to him. Let me make one thing clear. God made that law not because he just wanted another law. God made that law, not because he needed the ten percent. As a matter of fact, God doesn't need anything from us. As the Bible says, he owns the cattle on a thousand hills. No, God made that law for you and me. He made that law for us so we would have a way to show our gratitude to him. He told the Hebrews to bring a tithe for their sakes, not his. It gave them a chance to express their gratitude.

Now, let me ask you a question. Suppose God gave the Israelites this way of expressing their gratitude. He says, to them, give me a tithe of what you have--bring me the first fruits of your field, your flocks. But suppose an Israelite decided not to do that. Suppose he decided to keep part or all of it for himself. Who is he cheating? He isn't cheating God. God doesn't need his gifts. No, he is cheating himself. He is cheating himself of his gratitude.

That's why our text says what it does this morning. Our text says, "I have removed the sacred portion out of my house...." Are you guilty of stealing your own gratitude from God? If we do that, how grateful are we, really?

Do you think God can bless my house if it is contaminated with stolen gratitude? Our scripture passage this morning had some interesting things in it. Let me point them out to you. There are a lot of ways to tiptoe through the tithing. If a person is sad--if he is mourning--he deserves special treatment, doesn't he? That's a good excuse for not doing certain things--you can say, "I'm too sad. I'm in mourning." But the Bible says, "I have not eaten of the tithe while I was mourning." No, the writer didn't use that excuse. Do you do that? Do you say, "Well, I'm so emotional and upset, I feel so badly, I have to have a new dress. Things aren't going well and I feel my ego has been suffering and what I really need is a bright new car to make me feel better." Were tiptoeing through the tithing.

Or again, suppose an Israelite was unclean--that is, not ready to enter the presence of the Lord. And while he is unclean he touches some of his tithe--which makes it unclean. And he says, "O, that is too bad! My what a terrible accident. I touched the Lord's tithe when I was unclean. Now I can't give it." But the Bible says, "I haven't removed any of it when I was unclean." Are you ever guilty of that? We buy things, we spend money, we go places and do things. Then we say, "O, that's too bad! Now I can't give that to the Lord." Or again, the Israelite could offer some of his tithe for a good cause--such as honoring the dead--and then he could say, "well it was really for a good cause. I offered the first-fruits of what I had to honor poor old Aunt Jennie when she died. But the writer in the Bible says, "I didn't offer anything of yours, Lord, to the dead." Are we guilty of that. We buy something for the kids, we do something for someone we love, we take care of a relative and we say, "well, I can't tithe now, but it was for a good cause. It was a worthwhile thing to do."

Well, the writer of our scripture says, "God, I have removed the sacred portion from my house and I gave it as you commanded me." He wasn't tiptoeing through the tithing was he?

Are we guilty of trying to tiptoe through the tithing--to somehow get around it, to make excuses about it? I want to make a confession to you. As your pastor I think I have been guilty of misleading you. Every year at budget time I've been telling you that maybe you can't tithe all at once, so start by giving a definite percentage of your income and increase that percentage every year. I think I have been wrong to tell you that. That is tiptoeing through the tithing. In a way I'm guilty of telling you that it is okay for now to leave part of the sacred portion in your house. And that's wrong. That contaminates your home. And how can God bless your home if it is contaminated by stolen gratitude? I hope you will forgive me for that. There is no way to tiptoe through the tithing and I hope I'm never guilty again of making anyone think there is.

You know, we have built a lovely new building--we built parking decks for our cars, lovely parlors, beautiful libraries, elevators, and play areas. Why? For ourselves? No, we built them to have a better and larger ministry. But we won't have the funds to pay all the increased costs for that ministry if we tiptoe through the tithing.

Are you buying anything this summer--new clothes, a new car, a new home, a new club membership? Will you have to tiptoe through the tithing if you do? Are you going on a trip, taking a vacation--will you tiptoe through the tithing to do it? The top ten percent of all that comes to you and me belongs to God. Not because he needs it, but because we need to give it as an expression of our love and gratitude. Let's commit ourselves to faithfulness. Let's commit ourselves to tithing and not tiptoe through it. Let's get that sacred portion out of our houses and claim God's promise where he says, "bring the full tithe to the storehouse (and see) if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. (Malachi 3:10)