

Honesty With God

Memory Text: “But the ones that fell on the good ground are those who, having heard the word with a noble and good heart, keep it and bear fruit with patience.” (Luke 8:15)

Setting The Stage: *“A steward identifies himself with his master. He accepts the responsibilities of a steward, and he must act in his master’s stead, doing as his master would do were he presiding. His master’s interests become his. The position of a steward is one of dignity because his master trusts him.”* (Testimonies for the Church, vol. 9, p. 246)

Paul, writing to Titus, refers to ministers as being stewards of God (1:7), and Peter admonishes believers to take the gift they’ve been given and “minister it to one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.” (1 Peter 4:10) In the last days, Jesus asks a vital question of all His followers:

“Who then is a faithful and wise servant [steward], whom his master made ruler over his household, to give them food in due season? Blessed is that servant whom his master, when he comes, will find so doing.” (Matthew 24:45, 46; cp Luke 12:42)

We’re each called to be stewards (managers) of the gospel, of God’s truth, of building up the church, of administering the gifts the Holy Spirit has given us, of our families, our time, our lives, and our resources. We are Christ’s disciples living the life of discipleship—recognizing and responding to the Lordship of Christ in our life.

What brand do stewards carry around? Faithfulness, loyalty, a clear conscience, obedient, trustworthy, and...honesty.

“Honesty is the best policy.”

Illustration: When Fred Phillips, retired public-safety director and police chief of Johnson City, Tenn., was a regular police officer, he and his partner pulled over an unlicensed motorist. They asked the man to follow them to the police station, but while en route they spotted a North Carolina vehicle whose license plate and driver matched the description in an all-points bulletin.

The officers took off in a high-speed chase, and finally stopped the wanted man's car. Minutes later, as the felon was being arrested, the unlicensed motorist drove up. "If y'all will just tell me how to get to the station, I'll wait for you there," he said. "I'm having a hard time keeping up with you."

God is looking for those who will deal honestly with Him.

Sunday – A Matter Of Simple Honesty

Luke 16:10; Leviticus 27:30; Malachi 3:8

One thing most of us have in common is that we do not like dishonesty. We especially do not like it when we see it manifested in others. It's not easy, though, to see it in ourselves; and when we do, we tend to rationalize our actions, to justify them, to downplay their significance: *Oh, it's not that bad; it's only a small thing, not really important.* We might fool others most of the time, and even ourselves some of the time; but we can never fool God.

"Dishonesty is practiced all through our ranks, and this is the cause of lukewarmness on the part of many who profess to believe the truth. They are not connected with Christ and are deceiving their own souls." (Testimonies for the Church, vol. 4, p. 310)

Luke 16:10-12. What important principle does Jesus express here that should help us see how important it is to be honest, even in the "little things"?

This is the parable of the unjust steward, or the shrewd (astute, sharp, smart) manager. It's one of the most misunderstood parables in the Bible. Many people, when they read this passage, wonder if Jesus is speaking well of dishonesty. But that's not at all what He's doing. Instead, Jesus is using a clever crook as an example of priorities.

This crook knew he'd lose his job because of his dishonesty, so he planned a clever scheme. He goes out to some creditors who owe the manager money and asks, "How much do you owe?" One guy says, "I owe 800 gallons of oil." He says, "Cut the bill in half. We'll call it even." He goes to the next guy and says, "What do you owe?" "A thousand bushels of wheat." He says, "Cut that down to 800."

At the conclusion of collecting the funds, the master gave his evaluation. He doesn't commend him for his dishonesty (that's the reason he's being dismissed) - but he does say he was smart. The cleverness with which this man brought his career and misconduct to a climax was so amazing, and the thoroughness with which he carried out his plan so worthy of noble objectives, that the rich man could not help admiring his stewards sharpness and diligence. What did this crook do that was right? There were three things: (1) He looked ahead; (2) He planned ahead; (3) He acted quickly.

Jesus is saying that if I am faithful with what I have then God can trust me with more of it. You see, what I say is important, but there are only two things that really show what matters most to me: my bank account and my calendar.

How I spend my time and money show where my true priorities are. I can say that spending quality time with my wife is important to me, but if I only squeeze focused time in here and there it really isn't a high priority, is it? What we say is important, but our actions speak louder than words.

Likewise, how we spend our time, talents, and treasures tells something about where our heart really is. In fact, God even uses money to test us! There is a direct relationship in the Bible between what I do with my money and the spiritual depth in my life. That's clear in passage after passage.

Malachi 3:8: ““Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings.”

“No appeal is made to gratitude or to generosity. This is a matter of simple honesty. The tithe is the Lord’s; and He bids us return to Him that which is His own. . . . If honesty is an essential principle of business life, must we not recognize our obligation to God—the obligation that underlies every other?” (Education, pp. 138, 139)

Illustration: The little boy was sent by his mother to buy a 65-cent loaf of bread. While the baker was putting the bread into a bag, the boy noticed that the loaf looked rather small. "Isn't that a small loaf of bread for 65 cents?" "You'll have less to carry," replied the baker. The boy put 50 cents on the counter. "You're 15 cents short," said the baker. "That's right," replied the boy. "You'll have less to count."

God wants us to deal honestly with Him at all times.

Monday – A Life Of Faith

Genesis 22:1-12; Hebrews 12:2; 6:1, 2

Genesis 22:1-12. What do these verses tell us about the reality of Abraham's faith?

The life of faith is not a one-time event. We don't just express faith in a powerful way one time, and thus prove that we are, indeed, loyal and faithful Christians living by grace and covered by the blood of Christ. This act of faith wasn't something that Abraham just conjured up when he needed it. His life of faithfulness and obedience beforehand was what enabled him to do as he did. Had he often been unfaithful before this event, he never would have passed the test as he did.

The point is that the faith of a steward is not a one-time act either. Over time, it will grow either deeper and stronger or shallower and weaker, depending upon how the one who claims that faith exercises it.

What does Hebrews 12:2 tell us about the source of our faith and how to have faith?

Hebrews 12:2: “ Looking unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith...”

We must look to Jesus so that our faith will grow. The word finisher is used only in this one instance in the New Testament and also can be translated as “perfecter.” It means that Jesus is intent on bringing our faith to maturity and completeness. Thus, faith, the life of faith, is a dynamic experience: it grows, it matures, and it increases.

Hebrews 6:1, 2: “Therefore, leaving the discussion of the elementary principles of Christ, let us go on to perfection, not laying again the foundation of repentance from

dead works and of faith toward God, of the doctrine of baptisms, of laying on of hands, of resurrection of the dead, and of eternal judgment. And this we will do if God permits.”

Have you seen your faith grow and mature? If not, why not?

Tuesday – A Statement Of Faith

Genesis 14:18-20; Numbers 18:21; 1 Corinthians 9:13, 14; Matthew 23:23

Abraham lived his faith. Faith without works is dead. Living faith obeys and follows God. It takes God at His word. Abraham exhibited this faith throughout his life. One area in which he made a statement of faith was when he gave tithe of all:

Genesis 14:18-20: “Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: ‘Blessed be Abram of God Most High, Possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, Who has delivered your enemies into your hand.’ And he gave him a tithe of all.”

Taking 10% of your income and giving it back to God is definitely an act of faith. Tithing is grounded in creation. It’s also grounded in God’s love. It was the preserving and redemptive presence of God that moved Jacob to tithe (Gen 28:20-22). Tithing is a humble expression of dependence on God; a recognition that God is owner and Lord of all; an act of trust that Christ is our Redeemer.

Numbers 18:21: “Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting.”

1 Corinthians 9:13, 14: “Do you not know that those who minister the holy things eat of the things of the temple, and those who serve at the altar partake of the offerings of the altar? Even so the Lord has commanded that those who preach the gospel should live from the gospel.”

Matthew 23:23: “Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone.”

In what ways have you discovered for yourself the true spiritual blessings that come from returning tithe? How has it helped to increase your faith?

Wednesday – Honest Tithe: Holy to The Lord

Leviticus 27:30; Hebrews 7:2-10

Leviticus 27:30: “And all the tithes of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the Lord’s. It is holy to the Lord.”

Illustration: Let’s understand the word “holy” by briefly talking about America’s favorite pastime—baseball. The width of home plate never changes. It is always seventeen inches wide. Its dimensions are never up for discussion. You can choose your uniforms, hats, shoes, and bats, but when it comes to the plate, it is unchangeable and its size non-negotiable. If a pitcher can’t throw the ball over the seventeen-inch wide mark, the umpire doesn’t offer to widen it. You won’t hear him saying: “Hey, buddy, I’m going to get a new plate just for you. Would twenty-five inches help?” The width of the plate is immutable.

We might even say that the width of the home plate was “holy.” The idea of holiness in the Bible is, in many ways, like the home plate in baseball. Something holy describes something that is “set apart” by God. Popular opinion cannot change it. Majority rule does not alter it. My preference does not affect it. The Supreme Court cannot change it. When God deems something as holy, it is holy from Little League to the Majors, from the beginning of life to the end of life.

The first ten percent of everything we earn is, in God’s eyes, holy money. We never give it to God; we return what is already His. Its use has a holy function – to forward the work of God in sustaining the modest livelihoods of God’s ministers. The tithe is holy and as such shouldn’t be used for anything else.

The fact that tithe is holy transforms it into a test of loyalty for every person. It provides object evidence for us to evaluate the richness of our faith-commitment to the Lord. It is a test because it reaches us in what appears to be a common way, through our work. It appears to be part of our income and yet the Lord says, “It is holy to the Lord!”

The test forces us to answer the question: Are we willing to acknowledge the holiness of the tithe and to act accordingly? It is a test because it sets limits to our freedom by calling our attention to our dependence on God. Keeping it to ourselves to use it as we see fit, even if the motivation is good, is a violation of the holiness of tithe. God expects us to do one and only one thing with tithe—return it to Him.

Hebrews 7:2-10. Returning a faithful tithe has always been as unto the Lord. While it supports the ministry, no one can claim that in returning tithe they are paying the pastor’s salary. No, when you return a tithe, you are returning it unto the Lord, the Lord you love, the Lord you adore, the Lord you have entered into a business partnership with, trusting your means, your all to Him.

Thursday – Revival, Reformation & Tithing

2 Chronicles 31:4, 5, 12; Nehemiah 9:2, 3; 13:11, 12

The long reign of Hezekiah is considered the high point for the tribe of Judah. Not since the reign of David and Solomon had Israel enjoyed God’s blessing so greatly. Hezekiah’s record of revival and reformation is in 2 Chronicles 29–31: “He did what

was right in the eyes of the Lord.” (2 Chron. 29:2) “The house of the Lord was set in order.” (2 Chron. 29:35) The Passover was kept (2 Chron. 30:5). “There was great joy in Jerusalem.” (2 Chron. 30:26) Pagan images, altars, and high places were destroyed (2 Chron. 31:1). There was a sudden revival of heart and reformation of practice, resulting in an abundance of tithe and offerings:

2 Chronicles 31:4, 5, 12: “As soon as the commandment was circulated, the children of Israel brought in abundance the firstfruits of grain and wine, oil and honey, and of all the produce of the field; and they brought in abundantly the tithe of everything. 6 And the children of Israel and Judah, who dwelt in the cities of Judah, brought the tithe of oxen and sheep; also the tithe of holy things which were consecrated to the Lord their God they laid in heaps...Then they faithfully brought in the offerings, the tithes, and the dedicated things.”

Nehemiah gives another example of revival, reformation, and tithing (Neh. 9:2, 3). What did the revival of the heart mean? After Nehemiah reformed the “house of God” (Neh. 13:4), what did the people of Judah bring there?

Nehemiah 13:11, 12: “So I contended with the rulers, and said, ‘Why is the house of God forsaken?’ And I gathered them together and set them in their place. Then all Judah brought the tithe of the grain and the new wine and the oil to the storehouse. *“Revival and reformation are two different things. Revival signifies a renewal of spiritual life, a quickening of the powers of mind and heart, a resurrection from the spiritual death. Reformation signifies a reorganization, a change in ideas and theories, habits and practices.”* (Christian Service, p. 42)

The relationship between revival, reformation, and tithing is automatic. Without a return of the tithe, revival and reformation are lukewarm, if it is a revival at all. Too often, we as Christians stand idle on the sidelines when we ought to be involved actively on the Lord’s side. Revival and reformation demand a commitment, and tithing is part of that commitment. If we hold back from God what He asks of us, we cannot expect Him to respond to what we ask of Him.

Illustration: Booker T. Washington describes meeting an ex-slave from Virginia in his book, “Up From Slavery”: “I found that this man had made a contract with his master, two or three years previous to the Emancipation Proclamation, to the effect that the slave was to be permitted to buy himself, by paying so much per year for his body; and while he was paying for himself, he was to be permitted to labor where and for whom he pleased.

“Finding that he could secure better wages in Ohio, he went there. When freedom came, he was still in debt to his master some three hundred dollars. Notwithstanding that the Emancipation Proclamation freed him from any obligation to his master, this black man walked the greater portion of the distance back to where his old master lived in Virginia, and placed the last dollar, with interest, in his hands.

"In talking to me about this, the man told me that he knew that he did not have to pay his debt, but that he had given his word to his master, and his word he had never broken. He felt that he could not enjoy his freedom till he had fulfilled his promise."

The man made a promise and because he was honest, he intended to keep it no matter the inconvenience to himself. Do you deal honestly with your Lord? Do you return a faithful tithe? Have you tried the Lord to see if He won't bless you for accepting the call to live in faith?