

Hebrews 7:1-10

“Presenting Our Tithe to the King”

May 2, 2021

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Fifth Sunday in Easter

As this will be my last Sunday in the pulpit with you until August, I wanted to take a few moments before I read God’s word to make a few comments.

First, I just want to say thank you to you as a congregation for supporting me in taking this sabbatical. I believe that a pastoral sabbatical is a very healthy practice for us to engage in as a church, and I am so grateful for the opportunity to go away for a few months for a time of rest and renewal.

I also wanted to take a few minutes to communicate how grateful I am to be your pastor.

In May of 2014, seven years ago this month, you all voted in this sanctuary to call me to be your new pastor after the retirement of Dale Smith, who served you for 38 with remarkable integrity and wisdom and love. I remember waiting somewhat nervously out by the playground with my family while you discussed my call and voted.

I was grateful that you took a chance on me then, as a somewhat young and inexperienced pastor, and I’m so thankful for how the past seven years have gone.

I love our church so much. I think we’ve built something beautiful together.

Now, we’re never going to become the largest church in the Mid-Cities or set any records for raising money or creating the most impressive programs. We’ll probably never be written about in our denominational magazine or website. We’re not flashy like that.

But that's perfectly fine.

Because what makes our church beautiful for me is just simple things like the way we love one another. The way we pray earnestly for ourselves and our friends and those in need. The way we prioritize public worship Sunday by Sunday as the most important thing in our lives.

I love the way that you demand nothing more from me as a preacher other than that I teach you the word of God in my sermons.

I mean, that is a precious thing - to not feel like I need to stand up here and give you a TED talk every Sunday with a million amazing illustrations (because believe me, I do not have time for that!), but just teach you the Scriptures and that's enough. That's a remarkable gift for a congregation to give their pastor.

I love the way that we have embraced a healthy church culture where we can disagree about non-essential things with peace and humility. I love the way that we come from all kinds of different church backgrounds and figure out how to love one another here.

I love the way that we practice unity and real Christian deference with one another. I love the way that we pray and sing and recite the liturgy each Sunday with vigor and energy and joy. I love the way that we come to the table each week hungry for Jesus and ready to feast together.

I love the way that this church is a place where those who don't know Jesus well are welcomed and given space to know him better.

I love that this is a place where our children worship with us and learn what it means to be children of God. I love that this church is a place where we practice hospitality and welcome others into our homes.

I love that this is a place where intentional pastoral care is both offered and received, and people know what it is to be shepherded by their pastors and elders.

I love that we are learning together what it means to be the beloved. To really be the beloved, in union with our Lord Jesus.

For my money, those are the things that make our church beautiful.

I've grateful to have been your pastor now for almost seven years, and I'm excited about the ways the Lord is going to make us even more beautiful in the years to come.

With those things in mind, let's go now to God's word.

The portion of God's word that is given for us today is Hebrews 7:1-10, which is printed for you on the back of your order of worship if you'd like to read along.

I invite you to listen carefully now to God's holy and inerrant Word.

*1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. 3 He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.*

*4 See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! 5 And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, [a] though these also are descended from Abraham. 6 But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior.*

*8 In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. 9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, 10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.*

Thus far the reading of God's word. It is absolutely true, and it is given to you because your Father in Heaven loves you.

Prayer...

At the very end of chapter six, in verse 20, the Apostle identifies Jesus as "having become a high priest forever after the order of Melchizedek."

Now, here in chapter 10, he begins to really explain the significance of that title, which he began to apply to Jesus in chapter 5.

Melchizedek is a fascinating and mysterious character in the Scriptures. He first appears, without any real explanation, in Genesis 14, which we heard in our Old Testament reading this morning.

He just shows up there in Genesis 14 in the middle of a story about something else, a story of how Abraham (who was not a penniless wanderer, by the way - he was rich and powerful enough to employ 318 armed fighting men in his entourage, meaning that Abraham and Sarah traveled from place to place with thousands of people) defeated several mighty kings and delivered his nephew Lot from his captivity to them.

Then, as Abraham returns, Melchizedek suddenly appears in the narrative. He is described in Genesis as "the king of Salem" (probably the city that would come to be known as Jerusalem) and "a priest of God Most High" - that is, a priest of Yahweh.

Melchizedek comes bringing bread and wine for Abraham, and he blesses him with the blessing of the LORD, speaking these words over Abraham:

“Blessed be Abram by God Most High,  
possessor of heaven and earth;  
and blessed be God Most High,  
who has delivered your enemies into your hand.”

And after being blessed by Melchizedek and receiving bread and wine from his hand, Genesis tells us simply: “And Abram gave him a tenth of everything.”

This is the only place that Melchizedek is mentioned in the Old Testament, apart from Psalm 110, where the LORD declares to his son: “You are a priest forever, after the order of Melchizedek” - and of course, Jesus applies this psalm to himself during his ministry in the gospels.

Now, remember, the writer to the Hebrews is doing Holy Spirit inspired canonical theology throughout his letter - reading the Old Testament afresh and anew through the lens of the death and resurrection of Messiah Jesus, the Son of God.

And one of the most important claims that the Apostle will make in Hebrews is the claim that Jesus, as the Son of God, is not a high priest for his people after the order of Aaron and the Levites, but rather, a high priest after the order of Melchizedek - which means that he is a far greater and better high priest than any son of Aaron could ever be.

And in this section of Hebrews 7:1-10, he begins to really unpack that argument.

First, in verses 1-3, he writes:

*1 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, 2 and to him Abraham apportioned a tenth part of everything. He is first, by translation of his name, king of righteousness, and then he is also king of Salem, that is, king of peace. 3 He is without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.*

In these verses, the Apostle summarizes the story of Melchizedek and Abraham in Genesis and emphasizes two things.

First, the Apostle emphasizes that Melchizedek was not only a priest, but also a king - for his name literally translated in the Hebrew means "King of Righteousness" (Mel - King, zedek - Righteousness"), and he was king of salem, which is related to the Hebrew word "Shalom," which translates as "Peace."

This, of course, is significant for our understanding of Jesus - who is not only a High Priest, but also a High King - a position without parallel in all of the Old Testament outside of Melchizedek.

Second, the Apostle emphasizes that Melchizedek is just dropped into the Genesis narrative without a description of his birth or death, and with no recorded genealogy.

And in fact, if you read the book of Genesis, there is a great deal of emphasis placed on the birth and death of every single figure as well as their genealogy - that is, who they are descended.

We read of the birth and death of Adam. We read of the birth and death of Seth, and we know who his father is. The same is true of Noah. The same is true of Abraham. The same is true of Jacob and Isaac and Joseph.

Indeed, the book of Genesis is, in many ways, taken up with stories of how men were born, and when they died, and who they were descended from.

But Melchizedek stands out because none of these details about him are given at all!

He is, as the Apostle says, “without father or mother or genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but resembling the Son of God he continues a priest forever.”

Then, in verses 4-10, the Apostle argues particularly that the greatness of Melchizedek is shown by how Abraham (the greatest of the patriarchs of faith) paid him a tithe, and how in Abraham, the whole line of Levite priests that would come from Abraham paid a tithe to Melchizedek as well.

Listen to verses 4-10:

*4 See how great this man was to whom Abraham the patriarch gave a tenth of the spoils! 5 And those descendants of Levi who receive the priestly office have a commandment in the law to take tithes from the people, that is, from their brothers, though these also are descended from Abraham. 6 But this man who does not have his descent from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises. 7 It is beyond dispute that the inferior is blessed by the superior. 8 In the one case tithes are received by mortal men, but in the other case, by one of whom it is testified that he lives. 9 One might even say that Levi himself, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, 10 for he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek met him.*

Basically, what the Apostle is saying here is that Abraham demonstrated his fealty and submission to Melchizedek as a true priest-king of God Most High by offering him a tenth of his spoils.

He notes also that the Levites, who were descendants of Abraham along with all the tribes of Israel, received tithes from the people according to the Law given to Moses.

But then he makes the surprising point that the Levites themselves - Aaron and sons who became priests - in effect also offered a tithe to Melchizedek because they were "in the loins" of Abraham when he offered his tribute to the King of Righteousness and Peace.

The fascinating thing to see here is that the writer to the Hebrews, under the inspiration of the Spirit, is showing his New Testament readers that the principle of tithing our possessions to God is not rooted ultimately in the Mosaic law, but in something much more ancient - the encounter between Melchizedek and Abraham, which pre-dates the law of Moses by about 400 years.

You may have heard it said that "in the Old Testament law, the people of God were required to give a tithe to the Lord of all that he gave them. But Jesus came and he did away with the Old Testament law, and so now it doesn't really matter if you give 10 percent of your money to God. What really matters is your heart."

Now, for my money, that argument doesn't hold up for a whole lot of reasons, not the least of which is the fact that Jesus didn't come to abolish the law of the Old Testament but fulfill it.

But it also doesn't work because of this passage - because here the writer to the Hebrews forces us to wrestle with an uncomfortable question - if Abraham, our father in the faith, showed his submission and fealty to Melchizedek by giving him a tenth of everything, than how can we, as the sons and daughters of Abraham fail to give a tenth of our everything to Jesus, the greater Melchizedek?

Beloved, what I am saying to you is that I believe that this text, along with the Scriptures as a whole, teach us that giving a tenth part back to the Lord of what he gives us is a basic act of Christian discipleship.

Which means that obedience to God in the realm of your finances, your treasure, is not just about what's in your heart.

It's about *literally* taking the firstfruits, the first tenth of what you receive in terms of your wages or your sheep or your crops, or whatever it is, and giving it to the Lord as an act of submission to him.

Now, before I get any farther in my application of this point, I want to say three things to you.

First, no one at this church knows what you give. I don't know it, and the elders and deacons don't know it.

The only person who has access to that information is a third-party accountant who we contract with and isn't a part of our church at all.

Our accountant's name is Rhonda. She's great. But she doesn't know you, and you don't know her. She's the only one who accesses your giving records, and she's the one who prepares your giving statements at the end of each year. So, ultimately, your tithe is something that is between you and the Lord.

Second, I want you to know that I tithe to our church.

Twice a month, as soon as my salary hits my bank account, 10% goes to the church in an automatic draft from my bank.

It comes right off the top before our family spends anything else on our mortgage or groceries or whatever. Nothing of what I'm saying today isn't something I don't apply directly to myself and my own family's finances.

Third, I'm not preaching on tithing this morning because I have some concern about how our congregation supports the ministry of our church.

I'm actually ver grateful for the way in which you all financially support our church's ministry! I'm preaching on tithing this morning because it's simply what's next in the portion of God's Word that we're moving through.

So, why is tithing so important? Why is something God requires of us?

I think it's as simple as this.

*We tithe as a concrete act of submission to Jesus our King and a practical demonstration of our trust in his provision.*

Let me repeat that: *We tithe as a concrete act of submission to Jesus our King and a practical demonstration of our trust in his provision.*

Let me take first part of that statement: "We tithe as a concrete act of submission to Jesus our King."

All of us who are Christians would agree with the statement: Jesus is my Lord. We all believe that. But how do we put that statement into practice?

Well, there are a number of ways of course that we are called to practically submit to Jesus as Lord.

We submit to Jesus' authority as it is exercised in his church.

We listen to the Word of Jesus as it is preached through authorized ministers of his word.

We obey the law of Jesus as it is summarized in the Ten Commandments, which tell us how we are to love God and love our neighbor.

And we give ten percent of whatever treasure we receive in this life back to Jesus as a concrete sign of our submission to him and his role as Lord and King in our lives.

It's one thing to say "Jesus is Lord." It's quite another to live as though that is true.

And beloved, to tithe your actual treasure to Jesus is one of the most concrete ways you will make Jesus' Lordship real in your life.

Symbolically, of course, when you tithe, you are saying to Jesus: *"All that I have is yours by right, because you are my Lord and King. And I give you ten percent because that is what you ask."*

Tithing is one of the primary ways we move from saying the words, "Jesus is Lord" to embracing fully the truth of those words in our lives.

But we don't only tithe as a concrete act of submission to Jesus.

We also tithe as a practical demonstration of trust in his provision.

Friends, make no mistake, it is a real sacrifice to give the first ten percent of your paycheck back to Jesus. Believe me, I get it.

I started tithing when I was a young boy and my parents told me that of every ten dollars I got for my birthday, one dollar needed to go into the offering plate at church.

I continued to tithe when I was a young man - a full-time seminary student working multiple part-time jobs to support my family, which by that time included two little children and we were getting free milk and peanut butter from the government because our income was so small.

And I've continued to tithe over the years as my salary has grown but my family and my expenses have grown as well. And at every point it has been a sacrifice. It always would have been financially easier to not do it. I'm sure my financial planner would have told me that it would have told me it would be wiser to take that money each month and invest it if I had asked him.

But at some point I realized that the discipline of tithing over the years is one of the best ways that I have embraced financial weakness in my life in order to more practically and more fully depend on Jesus' promise to provide for me as one of his children.

And do you know what? Jesus has never, ever let me down.

I have absolutely no regrets over the tithes I have paid to King Jesus over the years. Because he has always taken care of me and my family.

And I suspect that I would not be so aware of his provision if I had clung to that ten percent and kept it for myself throughout the years.

What I'm saying is this - to tithe to Jesus is to place yourself in his hands - not just theoretically, but practically. And, friends, your Jesus will not fail to provide for you when you trust him in that way.

I'll close with this, Beloved.

Remember the words of Jesus in the gospel reading today. He said to his disciples: *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also."*

Now, in one sense those words are diagnostic.

Indeed, there's probably no matter way to figure out what a person really loves than doing a really close examination of his bank records.

But Jesus' words are not just diagnostic. They're also a promise.

And the promise is this - that as we faithfully give of our treasure to our Lord Jesus, that act of obedience will actually train and reorient our hearts.

In other words, as we give our treasure to Jesus over the decades of our life, our hearts will become less and less attached to our earthly treasure, and more and more attached to the one who is greater and more significant and more valuable than all the the treasure in this world - Jesus, our eternal High Priest after the order of Melchizedek.

For he comes to us, like Melchizedek, as our King and our Priest.

He comes, like Melchizedek, with bread and wine in his hands to gladden and strengthen our hearts and he speaks over us his blessing.

And so how can we not, like Abraham, in response, give Jesus, our High Priest and King, a tenth of everything as a sign of our submission and trust in him?

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.