THE DIVINE PROTECTION PLAN

One of the things Fr. Ed gave me before he left last month was an old bullet proof vest he used to wear when he was a NY State Trooper. These days it probably isn't a bad idea that we wear one wherever we are! When Fr. Ed dropped it off at the church office while the clergy were away in Texas for a clergy retreat, he told the secretary to let me know that he found it and that maybe it will come in handy when I talk about tithing. While we all laugh at such an analogy the truth is many in the church don't like to talk about money – especially their money. Even though the Bible and Jesus, Himself talk about money throughout God's Word, over 800 times, it usually is not a popular subject in the Church. Someone has said that the two things you shouldn't talk about with people are religion and politics. Well in the church it is politics and money.

As I look back at my time in the pulpit, the most flak I have received has been about two things - politics and money. And while politics can become a bit murky as it relates to God's Kingdom, the use of money in God's Kingdom is crystal clear.

God is Lord of all - the universe and all that it contains. He is Lord of our lives whether we accept Him or not, and He is Lord of all that we have, including our wealth. We are stewards of God's creation, our bodies and everything we have, we are not owners. An owner has rights, a steward has responsibilities Why? The steward has been entrusted by the owner with his possessions.

We live in a society where it is all about individual rights and while respecting human rights is important, individual rights do not supplant God's law. Moreover, His rights are the final authority in all matters spiritual and temporal. In fact, concerning believers, the Bible says, "You were bought with a price, therefore glorify God in your bodies." (1 Cor. 6:20).

Now this bullet proof vest offers some protection against a bullet. The Bible tells us that we are in a war of good and evil and that the evil comes to steal, kill and destroy. Did you know that? And that means the evil one wants to rob us not only of our love, joy, and peace but also of our wealth. Now if we do things our way, we are fair game for the attacks of the evil one. But if we do things God's way we are under the divine protection plan and that includes our money.
FOUR APPROACHES

Now usually when it comes to tithing in the church, there are four approaches that one can find the pastor or priest takes. **The first is money is never talked about.** The pastor says oh I am afraid to touch that subject and he never mentions a word about it. Well that is not good, because if our Lord talked about something we should, too. If our Lord didn't shy away from religion, and politics and money, so shouldn't we.

**The second approach is the other extreme.** The church is always talking about money and the need for people to give to this and that function, work, or ministry. Some of you have mentioned to me that you have been a part of such churches. Where it seems as if that is all they talk about. That is not good either.

**Then there is the third approach.** Tithing and giving is talked with a lot of emphasis on the Scriptures but it is about what you can receive by giving. You know the preacher who you mister do you want a that shiny new car - give it will be given to you! Or Miss, do you want that diamond ring, well open that checkbook right now and you'll see the window of God's blessing poured out on you. What I am talking about is the health, wealth and prosperity gospel. That our giving will result in financial prosperity. The more we give the more prosperous we will become. While there is some truth to this message in that God will bless us in our giving - the emphasis is wrong. We don't give to receive.

We give because God calls on us to give, because it is how we impact our world for Christ, it is who we show our gratitude, and it demonstrates our faithfulness. In other words, it shows that God is indeed Lord of our wealth. And I might add puts our wealth under the divine protection plan.

**And so this leads us to the fourth approach.** What I am talking about is the biblical mandate for wealth. Our wealth and its use is looked at from the whole witness of Scripture. And that means tithing and stewardship are taught and encouraged but it is not harped upon, neglected, or twisted to meet our own desires. We address it on occasion. We know what the Bible says about it and why. Just like we have to remind our children to eat their vegetables, we have to be reminded of what God's Word says about our wealth and its use.

So what does the Bible teach concerning wealth? Well we already know it is God's in the first place. He just lent it to us. Just like everyone is born with certain talents, and given certain gifts and some people have more than others, so too when it comes to our place in society. As American citizens we are blessed. Jesus said, **“to much is given much is required.”** We can think of the poor lady in the gospel who gives only a penny to the treasury but Jesus said she gave more than all the other rich folk. They gave out of their abundance, she gave out of her need. In other words, it is not the amount you have that matters, it is how you use it. And the Bible is clear on how we are to use our wealth. Five things we need to remember.
FIVE BIBLICAL PRINCIPLES CONCERNING WEALTH

First, work hard and honestly. If you can work, do it with vigor and to God's glory. God created us to work. He gave Adam and Eve the world and all it contains to explore it, tend to it, take care of it. Proverbs 28:19: “He who tills his land will have plenty of food, but he who follows empty pursuits will have poverty in plenty.” The Apostle Paul writes in Col. 3:23: that “Whatever you do, do your work heartily, as for the Lord rather than for men.” And we heard from our second reading this morning from 2 Thessalonians that some people expecting that Jesus was coming back soon, quite working. Paul rebukes them and tells them to get back to work. In fact, if someone doesn't want to work, Paul writes, don't let them eat!

Second, plan carefully - make a budget. Know what is coming in and going out.

Proverbs 27:23: “Know well the face of your flocks; and pay attention to your herds.”

Jesus said in Lk. 14:28-30: “For which of you, intending to build a tower, does not sit down first and count the cost, whether he may have enough to finish it; lest perhaps, after he has laid the foundation and is not able to finish, all those seeing begin to mock him, saying, This man began to build and was not able to finish.”

Third, save diligently. We need to put some of our money away. Proverbs 21:20: “In the house of the wise are stores of choice food and oil, but a foolish man devours all he has.”

1 Corinthians 16:2: On the first day of every week each one of you is to put aside and save, as he may prosper, so that no collections be made when I come. 10% is a good number to save. Save, save, save. Start off with a savings of a month's worth of expenses, then 3 months, 6 months and finally work your way up to a year. Pharaoh of Egypt had a disturbing dream. Joseph interpreted that dream and told him that there would be famine in the land after seven years of abundance, and that they needed to store grain when the famine would hit. The Pharaoh listened to Joseph and food was available during the hard times. We save because we don't know the future.

Fourth, spend wisely. We need to prioritize our spending addressing our needs first and then our wants. But because we live in a society of instant gratification, many go into debt because they meet their wants more than their needs. In God's Kingdom what is most important? The things of God and people. Our money should be spent on the things of God and on people. We are to invest in souls. It is why God tells us to take care of the poor, the widowed and the orphaned. It is why things like education, medicine, and ministry are so important. These pertain to people. Jesus said in Mt. 6, “Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. “But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves do not break in or steal; for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.... “No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.”
Finally, and most important, give generously. Do you want to truly know if God is Lord of someone's heart? You won't find out if they work hard, or if they make a budget, or save diligently or even spend wisely, you will know by whether or not they give generously. Think about that for a moment.

For it is this final area that the real test of one's faithfulness is found. Oh yes, God wants us to work hard but he doesn't want us to be workaholics. Oh yes, He wants us to make a budget but he doesn't want us to be micromanagers. He wants us to save, but not to hoard. He wants us to spend wisely but not merely on ourselves. No, the true test is found in our giving. Do you know the word, “give,” “given,” or “gave” are found over 1300 times in the Bible?!!

THE NUMBER “TEN” IN THE BIBLE

And so it shouldn't surprise us that the number ten in the Bible is the number of testing. Think about that for a moment. God called Abraham to give a tithe or a tenth to His priest, Melchizadek. That standard was affirmed to Moses and Kings David and Solomon, to the prophets and even Jesus Himself upheld the principle of the tithe in Mt.23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier provisions of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness; but these are the things you should have done without neglecting the others;.

The Ten Plagues tested the Pharaoh and Egypt to see if they would let the people of Israel free and humble themselves before Yahweh, our God. The Ten Commandments were the foundation of God's law and were given as a test for God's people to see whether or not they would follow God's law. It was a test of obedience.

Or how about the ten lepers? Do you remember that account in Luke 17:12? Jesus came upon ten lepers on His way and told them to show themselves to the priests and as they did so, they actually were healed on the way to the Temple! But only one came back and thanked Jesus for the healing. That one was a Samaritan. Jesus said, "Were there not ten cleansed? But the nine—where are they? 18"Was no one found who returned to give glory to God, except this foreigner?" 19And He said to him, “Stand up and go; your faith has made you well.” It was a test of gratitude. And then Jesus gave the Parable of the Ten Virgins waiting for the bridegroom as an illustration of being read for His return. Five kept oil for their lamps, the other five did bother to take any oil. The bridegroom was delayed so those who did not bring enough oil missed the bridegroom when they left to get more oil for their lamps. This was a test of the readiness.

So do you want to be under the divine protection plan. His name is Jesus, yes, but we will not be under his complete protection if we do things our own way. We have to do things God’s way.
A WARNING AND A PROMISE

Please turn now to Micah 3:8-12: "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. “You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the LORD of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. “Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,” says the LORD of hosts. “All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,” says the LORD of hosts." Here is the only place where God tells us to test Him! He tests us to see if we are willing to test Him.

If anything, now that we have seen and experienced the grace and mercy of Christ, the call to give is greater than it was under the Law. The truth is it is also the anecdote to covetousness. We know the command, Thou shalt not covet. Don't desire that which is not our own. If the tithe is the Lord's, then why do we keep it from Him? The principle of tithing delivers us from the spirit of greed, it is designed to confront and counteract our innate selfishness.

It’s why Jesus told the rich young ruler, "Go and sell all that you have," because He knew the rich man was trusting in His wealth rather than in God.

The truth is because God gives to us, we are to be givers to Him and to others. Jesus said, "Give and it will be given to you, good measure, pressed down and running over."

The fact is God's command to tithe is a test. It is a test of our faith, it is a test of our obedience, it is a test of the stewardship of what God has given us. And when we recognize it is a test of faith, it is an opportunity for us to test God knowing full well that God will respond as He promised He would.

When we understand the tithe - we understand the principle, the blessing and the need. For if God's people don't give, God's work does not get done. So I encourage you to consider the Lord's charge - to give back what is rightfully His - the tithe! In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, AMEN!