

Sermon Followed by Service

March 3, 2024

Malachi 3:6-10

Little junior's standing up on the kitchen counter. Dad holds out his arms: "Jump! I'll catch you!" What might be some reasons junior doesn't jump? (Afraid, doesn't trust dad; found something else more fun; just wants to say "no") Today, our Father in heaven is holding out his arms, inviting us, challenging us to let go of ourselves and trust him. What are some reasons we might not jump?

Now, when junior refuses to jump, what does he miss out on? (A chance to grow closer with his dad, right? He doesn't get to feel how strong his dad's arms are ... how quick his dad is to catch him ... how fun and free it is to be able to jump into dad's arms) And if we hold back from our Father's challenge, what do we miss out on? (That same thing - a chance to feel how strong our Father's arms are ... how quick he can be to take care of us ... how free and fulfilling it is to be safe in God's arms.)

Now in our lesson when the Father holds out his arms: "Test me," he isn't playing a game and his children aren't smiling. The Father caught his children cheating him, stealing from him. How? They were giving God their left-overs; they gave God their garbage and kept the best for themselves. Instead of giving God the tithe they owed him, they held back for themselves. Why? It could have been greed: "It's mine!" or it could have been "wise financial planning": "if I don't take care of me, who will?" Either way, what did God call it? Robbery!

It's so easy, isn't it? God says "jump; test me in this; I'll catch you"; but we might think: "How can I jump when I'm so deep in debt?" So our Father stretches out his arms, his arms that have the whole world in his hands and he challenges us: "test me in this; I have everything you need; I'll take care of you"; but we see our bills, we see what we think we'll miss out on; we might think: "God's test ... it's not smart." And instead of giving God our best we give him our left-overs; instead of giving him our biggest thank-offering, we keep our biggest thank-offering to thank ourselves, because after all, "we earned it." We might call it "keeping the family happy" or "wise financial management." It doesn't matter what we call it; God calls it robbery.

Now, God's complaint here really isn't about dollars. It's about hearts - hearts more interested in holding on to the stuff of this damned world than holding on to his promises; hearts that would rather play God and take care of themselves than believe God's promises to take care of them. That's God's issue here. Intentionally holding back offerings from God isn't about dollars, it's about holding back hearts from God. And carelessly slopping together an offering plan without thinking through all that God gives us and God's plan for what he gives us ... that isn't about dollars, it's about a heart careless with God. That's a big issue with God, again, not because of the dollars, but because hearts that hold back from God and hearts that are careless with God are hearts setting themselves against God. And hearts setting themselves against God are hearts setting themselves for hell.

So why are we still here? Check out the first verse of our lesson: **“I, the LORD, do not change.”** God chose us to be his, he adopted us as his. And God doesn’t change. At creation, at the Garden of Eden, God gave us his best. And when that wasn’t good enough for us ... when Adam and Eve thought they could do better on their own, again God didn’t change. Instead he gave us his best again, his own one and only Son Jesus. And what did Jesus do? He gave us his best; he gave his life for ours. He gave God his best; he gave his life in place of ours. In Jesus, God forgives us full and free; and in Jesus, God sees us like Jesus - giving and loving, full and free, just the way he created us to be.

How? How does Jesus make the difference for us? Jesus was just like his Father; he didn’t hold back. **“You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sakes he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.”** Think of the standard of living Jesus was used to in heaven. He gave it up, for you, for me. Think of where Jesus’ love got him in this world - no house, no home, no clothes, no respect - dead on a cross. He gave it all up for you, for me - to set us right with God.

How could Jesus do that? He knew God’s purpose and plan for him. He trusted God’s promise for him: **“Father, into your hands I commit my spirit.”** Jesus knew he could give up everything in heaven and on earth because he trusted God had him safe in his hands; he trusted God had a better life for him. Jesus trusted, and God kept his promise.

That's God's challenge for us - test him in this: trust him in his promises! And yes, we have God's promises! When it comes to supporting Christ's church, when it comes to offerings, we have God's promises! From our lesson – **“Test me in this, and see if I won't open the floodgates of heaven to bless you!”** From Philippians – **“My God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus.”** From 2 Corinthians – **“God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work ... You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion.”** That plan and promise for you is no less powerful and sure than the plan and promise that raised Jesus back to life and seated him at God's right hand in heaven.

With Jesus, those promises are yours. So what do we do with them? Keep them off to the side for a more convenient time? Pick and choose which promises we like and which we don't? No, of course not. We take God's promises God's way - we trust them and we test them.

Now, what is God's way to trust and test his promises? First, we trust and test God's promises with first-fruit offerings. Instead of giving God our left-overs, we trust God to take care of us and we give him our first and our best. That is, instead of setting our offerings after we pay our bills, we first set our offerings, and then decide what kind of bills to rack up with the left-overs God gives us. And as we set our offerings, we trust and test God's promises with generous, proportionate, percentage offerings. That is, we look at how God has blessed us, we figure,

we plan, and we set a generous percentage portion of what God has given us to be our offerings back to the Lord. What is a generous percentage proportion? Look at how you spend the rest of what God has entrusted to you; the way we spend on our wants and “extras” can help show us what generous might be. For some of us, 10% might be generous; for others of us, 20% might be stingy robbery. God doesn’t tell us how much to give. He doesn’t just look at how the dollars figure on paper; he looks at how our hearts figure with love – trusting and testing his promises.

Trusting and testing God’s promises - that’s a good place to be, isn’t it? Like Elijah and the widow at Zarephath - with God taking care of them. Like Jesus - with God raising him to life and to heaven. Like little junior - with dad’s arms stretched out and ready to catch him into a great big hug. That’s what God has for you. Trust those arms; test those promises - and see how God blesses you! Amen.

March 2 & 3, 2024

THE SERVICE

IN OUR WORLD TODAY ... we find it so easy to get trapped in the wrong set of commands and promises. From inside us we listen to the commands and promises of self looking out for self, while around us it is so easy to fall for the commands and promises of masterful marketers.

IN OUR WORSHIP TODAY ... we are inspired and encouraged by the commands and promises of our God. He is not looking out for Himself. He is not marketing to us. He is promising blessing as we trust and stretch and take hold of the life that is truly life.

OPENING HYMN

“Gracious God, You Send Great Blessings”

Hymn 752

Gracious God, you send great blessings new each morning all our days.
For your mercies never ending, for your love we offer praise.

Refrain

Lord, we pray that we, your people who your gifts unnumbered claim,
through the sharing of your blessings may bring glory to your name.

By your Word you formed creation filled with creatures large and small;
as we tend that endless treasure may our care encircle all. *Refrain*

In his earthly life, our Savior knew the care of faithful friends;
may our deeds of dedication offer love that never ends. *Refrain*

Heav'nly Father, may our caring bear the imprint of your grace;
with the Son and Holy Spirit, praise be yours in ev'ry place! *Refrain*

INVOCATION

In the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

CONFESSION AND ABSOLUTION

If we claim to be without sin, we deceive ourselves
and the truth is not in us.

**If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just
and will forgive us our sins
and purify us from all unrighteousness.**

Let us confess our sins to the Lord.

Holy God, gracious Father,

I am sinful by nature

and have sinned against you in my thoughts, words, and actions.

I have not loved you with my whole heart;

I have not loved others as I should.

I deserve your punishment both now and forever.

But Jesus, my Savior, paid for my sins

with his innocent suffering and death.

Trusting in him, I pray: God, have mercy on me, a sinner.

Silence for meditation and reflection

Our gracious Father in heaven has been merciful to us. He sent his only Son, Jesus Christ, who gave his life as the atoning sacrifice for the sins of the whole world. Therefore, as a called servant of Christ and by his authority, I forgive you all your sins in the name of the Father and of the T Son and of the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**

LORD, HAVE MERCY (*Sung*)

In peace let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace from above and for our salvation, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For the peace of the whole world, for the well-being of the Church of God, and for the unity of all, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

For this holy house and for all who offer here their worship and praise, let us pray to the Lord.

Lord, have mercy.

Help, save, comfort, and defend us, gracious Lord.

Amen.

PRAYER OF THE DAY

God, in your infinite love, you have entrusted to us the knowledge of your truth and the gifts of your goodness. Help us use them as good stewards, giving generously, praying urgently, and working diligently, that we may share in bringing others to your truth and hasten the coming of your kingdom; through your Son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.

FIRST READING

Proverbs 3:1–10

My son, do not forget my teaching,
but keep my commands in your heart,
for they will prolong your life many years
and bring you peace and prosperity.

Let love and faithfulness never leave you;
bind them around your neck,
write them on the tablet of your heart.
Then you will win favor and a good name
in the sight of God and man.

Trust in the LORD with all your heart
and lean not on your own understanding;
in all your ways submit to him,
and he will make your paths straight.

Do not be wise in your own eyes;
fear the LORD and shun evil.
This will bring health to your body
and nourishment to your bones.

Honor the LORD with your wealth,
with the firstfruits of all your crops;
then your barns will be filled to overflowing,
and your vats will brim over with new wine.

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

PSALM OF THE DAY

Psalm 73A

Refrain



Tone



As for me, my feet had / almost slipped;
I had nearly lost my / foothold.
For I envied the / arrogant
when I saw the prosperity of the / wicked.
It troubled me deeply till I entered the sanctuary / of God;
then I understood their final / destiny. *Refrain*

You guide me with your / counsel,
and afterward you will take me into / glory.
Whom have I in / heav'n but you?
And earth has nothing I desire be- / sides you.
My flesh and my / heart may fail,
but God is the strength of my heart and my portion for- / ever.

**Glory be to the Father and / to the Son
and to the Holy / Spirit,
as it was in the be- / ginning,
is now, and will be forever. / Amen. *Refrain***

SECOND READING

2 Corinthians 9:6–15

Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. As it is written:

“They have freely scattered their gifts to the poor;
their righteousness endures forever.”

Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

This service that you perform is not only supplying the needs of the Lord’s people but is also overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God. Because of the service by which you have proved yourselves, others will praise God for the obedience that accompanies your confession of the gospel of Christ, and for your generosity in sharing with them and with everyone else. And in their prayers for you their hearts will go out to you, because of the surpassing grace God has given you. Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!

The Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

GOSPEL ACCLAMATION

2 Corinthians 8:9

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

GOSPEL

Matthew 6:25–34

“Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothes?”

Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? Can any one of you by worrying add a single hour to your life?

“And why do you worry about clothes? See how the flowers of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

The Gospel of the Lord. **Praise be to you, O Christ!**

HYMN OF THE DAY

“Where Your Treasure Is”
Hymn 828

Refrain

Where your treasure is, there your heart shall be.
All that you possess will never set you free.
Seek the things that last; come and learn from me.
Where your treasure is, your heart shall be.

What do you gain from all your worry,
what you should eat or what to wear?
There is no peace in stress or hurry.
Do you not know that you are held within God’s care? *Refrain*

Look at the ravens high above you.
They do not work their whole life through,
and yet God feeds them and protects them.
So how much more will God protect and care for you? *Refrain*

Behold the lilies in their splendor. In grace and beauty are they dressed,
and yet so soon their bloom is faded.

So how much more will those who look to God be blessed? *Refrain*

O little flock, do not be frightened; yours is the kingdom of the Lord.

Give your possessions to the needy;

obtain a treasure in God's heaven safely stored. *Refrain*

SERMON

Proverbs 3:1-10

NICENE CREED

We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all that is, seen and unseen.

We believe in one Lord, Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, eternally begotten of the Father, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made, of one being with the Father. Through him all things were made. For us and for our salvation, he came down from heaven, was incarnate of the Holy Spirit and the Virgin Mary, and became truly human. For our sake he was crucified under Pontius Pilate. He suffered death and was buried. On the third day he rose again in accordance with the Scriptures. He ascended into heaven and is seated at the right hand of the Father. He will come again in glory to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end.

We believe in the Holy Spirit, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeds from the Father and the Son, who in unity with the Father and the Son is worshiped and glorified, who has spoken through the prophets. We believe in one holy Christian and apostolic Church. We acknowledge one baptism for the forgiveness of sins. We look for the resurrection of the dead and the life of the world to come. Amen.

PRAYER OF THE CHURCH

Lord God, from whom all blessings flow, we praise you for everything you provide to sustain our lives. Lead us every day to be thankful for your gifts and content with what you have given. Today we pray that you would guide us to manage your blessings wisely for the good of your kingdom.

As we use your gifts to meet our needs, move us also to support the ministry of the gospel with our offerings.

Before your Son ascended to your throne, he called us to preach the good news to every creature. In grace you created the public ministry so that we may answer his call by sending others in our place. Impress on us the immense importance of the task you have given us to proclaim your Word to the world.

In our words and in our offerings, move us to be faithful witnesses of your grace.

Work in our hearts so that our gifts do more than support a cause or meet a need. Move us to give out of love for you, our King and Redeemer.

Lead us to bring our gifts first to honor you, the Giver of all things.

Teach us to give as an ongoing part of life since the work of the gospel continues every day. Forgive us for the sins of apathy and carelessness and for giving that reacts only to urgent pleas or crises.

Help us see the wisdom of planning our offerings as a regular routine of our faith.

Teach us determine our offerings in view of your blessings to us. The widow's coins were meager, but they were all she had. Move us to believe that to whom much is given, much is also expected.

Give us courage to bring gifts that reflect your gifts to us.

Teach us to give our offerings as a cheerful response of our faith in you and your Son. Spare us all feelings of obligation or resentment as we give. Help us to see our offerings as the vehicle that carries the gospel to the lost, and lead us to rejoice with the angels of heaven over every sinner who repents.

Help us to balance our duty to give with the joy of giving.

Hear us, Lord, as we pray in silence.

Silent prayer

Precious Lord, all our blessings come from you. Lead us again and again to thank you and then move us to be wise and faithful stewards of your gifts. May our gifts and offerings bring souls here and far away to the gracious gift of Jesus and his love.

Lord, hear us and grant us this blessing. Amen.

LORD'S PRAYER

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

THE SACRAMENT

(Guests, please see our communion practice on page 2.)

(Gluten-free wafers are available; ask Pastor.)

PREFACE (Sung)

The Lord be with you.

And also with you.

Lift up your hearts.

We lift them up to the Lord.

Let us give thanks to the Lord our God.

It is right to give him thanks and praise.

It is truly good and right that we should at all times and in all places give you thanks, O Lord, holy Father, almighty and everlasting God, through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lived among us as a human being and revealed his glory as your only Son, full of grace and truth. Therefore, with all the saints on earth and hosts of heaven, we praise your holy name and join their glorious song:

HOLY, HOLY, HOLY (SUNG)

Holy, holy, holy Lord, God of power, God of might.

Heaven and earth are full of your glory.

Hosanna in the highest. Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

Hosanna in the highest, hosanna in the highest!

WORDS OF INSTITUTION

Our Lord Jesus Christ, on the night he was betrayed, took bread; and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to his disciples, saying, "Take and eat; this is my τ body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

Then he took the cup, gave thanks, and gave it to them, saying, "Drink from it, all of you; this is my τ blood of the new covenant, which is poured out for you for the forgiveness of sins. Do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of me."

The peace of the Lord be with you always. **Amen.**

JESUS, LAMB OF GOD (SUNG)

Jesus, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.

Jesus, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; have mercy on us.

Jesus, Lamb of God, you take away the sin of the world; grant us your peace.

DISTRIBUTION SONG - CHOIR

"Softly and Tenderly"

Will L. Thompson

Softly and tenderly Jesus is calling, Calling for you and for me;

See, on the portals He's waiting and watching, Watching for you and for me.

Refrain

Come home, come home, You who are weary, come home;

Earnestly, tenderly, Jesus is calling, Calling, O sinner, come home!

Why should we tarry when Jesus is pleading, Pleading for you and for me?

Why should we linger and heed not His mercies, Mercies for you and for me?

Refrain

*Time is now fleeting, the moments are passing, Passing from you and from me;
Shadows are gathering, deathbeds are coming, Coming for you and for me.*

Refrain

*Oh, for the wonderful love He has promised, Promised for you and for me!
Though we have sinned, He has mercy and pardon, Pardon for you and for me.*

Refrain

DISTRIBUTION HYMN

“All Depends on Our Possessing”

Hymn 807

All depends on our possessing God’s abundant grace and blessing,
though all earthly wealth depart. They who trust with faith unshaken
in their God are not forsaken and will keep a dauntless heart.

He who to this day has fed me and to many joys has led me
is and ever shall be mine. He who ever gently schools me,
he who daily guides and rules me, will remain my help divine.

Many spend their lives in fretting over trifles and in getting
things that have no solid ground. I shall strive to win a treasure
that will bring me lasting pleasure and that now is seldom found.

When with sorrow I am stricken, hope anew my heart will quicken;
all my longing shall be stilled. To his lovingkindness tender
soul and body I surrender, for on God alone I build.

Well he knows what best to grant me; all the longing hopes that haunt me,
joy and sorrow, have their day. I shall doubt his wisdom never;
as God wills, so be it ever; I commit to him my way.

If my days on earth he lengthen, he my weary soul will strengthen;
all my trust in him I place. Earthly wealth is not abiding,
like a stream away is gliding; safe I anchor in his grace.

CLOSING PRAYER

Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good;
his mercy endures forever.

Whenever we eat this bread and drink this cup,
we proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.

We give you thanks, O Lord, for the foretaste of the heavenly banquet you have given us in this Sacrament. Through this gift you have fed our faith, nourished our hope, and strengthened our love. By your Spirit, help us to live as your holy people until that day when you will receive us as your guests at the wedding supper of the Lamb, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. **Amen.**

BLESSING

The Lord bless you and keep you.

The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you.

The Lord look on you with favor and give you peace. **Amen.**

CLOSING HYMN

"On My Heart Imprint Your Image"

Hymn 405

On my heart imprint your image, blessed Jesus, King of grace,
that life's riches, cares, and pleasures have no pow'r to hide your face.
Let the clear inscription be: Jesus, crucified for me,
is my life, my hope's foundation, and my glory and salvation.

OFFERING

*If you prefer online giving, you may scan this code
with your mobile device.*



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Challenge #2

Commit to a gift or new level of giving in our new era of ministry

- God has answered our prayers for a new Principal / Staff Minister of Outreach. Thank you, Lord! Now, how will we respond to God's answer to our prayers?
- Our Illinois Invest in Kinds tuition scholarship program has come to an end. How will we meet the opportunities God brings to us?

The God-Lived Life is not first or most about money for ministry (as good as money for ministry is). The God-Lived Life is first and foremost about encouraging the hearts of God's people to think and to live in the promises of God with the heart of God. With God's heart, we see God blessing us and stretching us with a new era in ministry. How will we respond?

Challenge #3

Create/update my will, perhaps include support of God's work

- Do you have an estate plan or will? If you don't and you have no family and no stuff, an estate plan may not be a priority. But if you do have family or earthly possessions, then an estate plan could possibly save your family distress, and turn your possessions into blessings for people and/or ministry you care about.
- Do you already have an estate plan? When was the last time you reviewed it? Is it still up-to-date? Have you considered including Jesus in your estate plan?

Challenge #4

Join us for our Estate Planning Workshop on March 17

On Sunday, March 17, our WELS Giving Counselors will be at St. John for a Planned Giving and Estate Planning Workshop. Not only are they helpful in arranging estate plans and tax-wise giving to the Lord, but they are also very helpful in arranging estate plans that look out for our loved ones. They aren't looking to get for themselves or anyone else; they are looking to help us give and provide with the heart of our Father. Please, bring your questions.

Let's Check our Financial Self-Awareness and "Intentionality"

A Two-Number Test

- #1 - How much money is God entrusting to you this year? _____
(Salary, retirement funds, ...) (Not sure about this year? Use last year's numbers.)
- #2 - How much money are you giving back for the Lord's work? _____
- Bonus # - What percent is that? ($\#2 \div \#1$) _____

Thinking of what God is giving you, what would you expect God to say to you?
Why?

"Well done, good and faithful servant!" - Matthew 25

"Excel, stretch, grow in the grace of giving!" - 2 Corinthians 8

"Repent, and see if I don't throw open the flood gates of heaven." - Malachi 3

Another Two-Number Test

- #1 - How much money is God entrusting to you this year? _____
(Salary, retirement funds, ...)
- #2 - How much money do you spend on entertainment? _____

Thinking of what God is giving you, what would you expect God to say to you?
Why?

"Well done, good and faithful servant!" - Matthew 25

"Excel, stretch, grow in the grace of giving!" - 2 Corinthians 8

"Repent, and see if I don't throw open the flood gates of heaven." - Malachi 3

A Comprehensive Check for Self-Awareness and Intentionality

Create / Review your Budget (Giving / Saving / Spending Plan)

We have paper forms available for tech-less freedom. You can find other tools, forms, and apps through your financial institution or Financial Peace University at RamseySolutions.com.

(Continues on previous page.)

The God-Lived Life - A Life Lived Shrewdly Manage with Intention

The God-Lived Life is a Challenge.

- For some, it may be a challenge to change, a challenge to repent and live the new life God has for us.
- For some, it may be a challenge to step out and live differently than the rest of their world.
- For all of us, it is a challenge to grow in living with the heart and mind of our God!

Over the past year, we have heard God challenge us to live in his Word, to serve his church and his world, to love beyond family and friends. Now we hear God challenge us to A Life Lived Shrewdly, a life where we manage God's blessings with intention and attention with the heart and mind of Christ! Below are four challenges. Which will you accept?:

Challenge #1

Commit to Financial Self-Awareness and "Intentionality"

- Do we know where "our" money is going, or even how much money God is entrusting to us?
- How do we determine how we will spend, save, use the money God is entrusting to us?
 - Do we rely on our "feel"?
 - Do we simply respond to our "needs," wants, whims?
 - Do we put God's money to work with intention and attention to the wonderful life-saving, life-changing, life-enriching purposes God has for the money he gives us?

(Continues on previous page.)