

Do you have anything left for the Lord?

⁶ “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty. “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. “But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’ ⁷ “You place defiled food on my altar. “But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’ “By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible. ⁸ When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty. ⁶ “I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷ Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty. “But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’ ⁸ “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ “In tithes and offerings. ⁹ You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. ¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the LORD Almighty. ¹² “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty.

What are your priorities? It depends on where you are in life. If you are active duty, your priority is the mission...mission first! If you are homemaker, the children, bills, cleaning, and groceries are a priority. If you are a student, your homework comes first. If you are an employer, the customer is number one. If you are an employee, your job performance is a top priority. In his Word, God, our Creator, who has given us these responsibilities and jobs, reminds us that he comes first in every aspect of our lives, even in the areas of money, time, skills and talents. In Exodus 20 he tells us, “You shall have no other gods.” And in Matthew 22:37-39 Jesus reminds us, “Love the Lord your God with all your heart, soul and mind.”

But Christians sometimes ask questions like, “Doesn’t God expect me to take care of my family and home first?” The Israelites tried that. The nation of Israel had been held captive for 70 years, over 1,000 miles away from home. The LORD allowed the nation of Babylon to capture the city of Jerusalem and deport its citizens. After 70 years there was a new change in government. King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Israelite exiles to return home. As they marched up the hill to the Holy City, they saw that the walls of Jerusalem were badly deteriorated. The temple was a heap of rubble. But what was the first action the Israelites performed? They took care of their own homes first. The LORD sent his prophet Haggai to admonish his people. “Here you sit in your wood

paneled homes, which are typically built by princes and kings, while my house, my temple, lies in ruins.” This was not what God wanted them to do. The Israelites gave their LORD the leftovers of their time and abilities. In addition, they gave the leftovers of their offerings.

In our lesson from the prophet Malachi we hear the LORD tell his people that they have made his altar contemptible, that is, polluted and unclean. He accused them of robbing him of offerings. He says to them, “When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the LORD Almighty.” It’s like having guests over to your home. You wouldn’t pull out leftovers two weeks old and serve them to your guests. You would never do that. That’s very tacky. When guests come over you give them your best.

The LORD expected the best from his people. After all, he had given them his best. He promised them that they would return home after 70 years in exile. And they did. He promised them that as they made their long journey from Mesopotamia to Palestine, he would protect his people from their enemies. And he did. The LORD continued to remind them that his promise of a Messiah was still intact. The people responded with lackluster gifts, White Elephant gifts, “Here LORD, I’m not using this. You can have it.” The people were deliberately withholding their offerings, making a mockery of God. The thought of this is preposterous! Deceive the omniscient, Almighty God? And the whole nation was guilty, even the priests! God responded by withholding blessings from his people. Soon their money didn’t go as far because of inflation. Their harvest not as bountiful because there was a drought. God’s people did not prosper. The heart of the issue is that the Israelites doubted God’s love for them. They were also apathetic, lazy, and greedy and therefore, their offerings were not brought with a true heart.

Are we not also robbing God of our time, talents and offerings when we place our homes, jobs, hobbies and families as more important than he? Are we not also robbing God when we give him our leftovers? Do we give Him our best time rather than what little time we have left over in our busy schedules? Do we use our talents to further His Kingdom, or to just take care of ourselves? Do we give Him the generous firstfruit portion of our income, or what we have left over after paying the mortgage and bills and buying the groceries?

God is neither pleased with our offerings nor with our priorities. It’s very clear that we have not done what he asks of us. We have lived by our self-made priorities, not his rules for life. After all, who knows best how to live our lives? God or us? In vs7 God calls to us and says, “Return to me.” That Hebrew word for return is scattered all throughout the Old Testament. It means repentance, a setting aside of our foolish pride, turning away from our sinful priorities and turning back in faith to our Father. What happens when we turn to him? A promise is kept...

Everyday as you remember your baptism, when you drown your sinful attitudes in repentance, what follows your confession? A promise from the Lord... the promise he

gives you today is, “I the LORD do not change.” (vs6) The LORD is the God who makes promises and keeps everyone of them. He doesn’t change. The promise he makes in his Word is that all who turn in true repentance to him will receive forgiveness. This is the same LORD who promised his people freedom from captivity to the Babylonians. This same LORD also promises you freedom from captivity. He made that promise to you at your baptism. Baptized into Christ’s name you are covered with Christ’s blood, shed for you on Calvary’s cross. Jesus’ blood covers over your sins of misplaced priorities, your sins of leftovers for God. Those sins are washed away through baptism. Your sinful nature is drowned in the waters of baptism. You have been freed from your slavery to your sinful nature and released from its evil deeds and desires. You have freedom from captivity to Satan and his evil schemes, who tries to tempt you to put God last in your life. Through baptism you have been freed from death, you are released from hell. You are given freedom to live a life pleasing to your Father in heaven. Through Christ’s resurrection, given to you at baptism, you are free to live forever in heaven with your Father.

Forgiven and free we turn to our God when he points out our sins. He turns to us through his Word and Sacraments and offers us forgiveness. In response, we turn back to him again....with White Elephant gifts, with leftovers? No way. In thankfulness for what he has done for us, we give to Him the firstfruits of our time, talents and treasures. We give him our best because he gave us his best.

I’m sure that with Black Friday fast approaching, you’re thinking about Christmas presents. But guys...I don’t think that you would go to your garage or the closets of your home and pull out something your wife hasn’t used for a while and give it to her as a gift. You would give her your best because you love her. In the same way, we give back to God our best because he first loved us.

No more leftovers, no more misplaced priorities, according to your new self, created at baptism. Your new self also listens to God’s promises. See what the LORD will do for you? (vs10) **“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.”** The temple had storerooms where offerings were kept. This money went to pay the priests, provide clothes for them, supply funding for the upkeep of the temple. He tells his people, “Bring your whole offering, the first and best of what you have.” Then he says, **“Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty.** Prove me wrong. Prove that I am not who I say I am. **“...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven...”** That sound a lot like what God did with the flood in Noah’s day, doesn’t it? His blessings will rain down. **“...and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.”** This sounds like Psalm 23, my cup overflows, overflows with blessing that we will not have enough room for it. Now, is the LORD promising you financial blessings if you put him first? He doesn’t say that here. But could he? Sure. Has he in the past? Absolutely. Could these overwhelming blessings be physical health, a healthy family, Christian friends, spiritual blessings? Sure. But the main point is, the LORD promises to bless you when you put him first.

Now, how do I determine if I am giving my first and best to God? How can I keep from giving him my leftovers? At your cottage meeting you received a *Thinking and Planning* sheet. In the worksheet section, there's a place for you to fill in what you're currently giving to the LORD, and another place to fill in your total gross income is. You have to determine that number for yourself. But to make sure that your offering is the first and best, take that money off the top first, and use the leftovers for yourself. Set that aside that amount every month or every two weeks, whenever you get paid, so it's there, and it's not leftovers, but the firstfruits (Ex 23:19). This isn't on your *Thinking and Planning* sheet, but think about your time. How can I give the best and first to the LORD? Before I pick up the remote, computer mouse or video game controller, I will sit down with God's Word and make time for prayer first. Before I make plans that happen immediately after church, I will reschedule, and make them for after Bible class and give God the best of my time. Think about your talents. What could you offer here at church? Cleaning, make a new banner for the sanctuary, computer data entry, phone calling, praying for others, teaching our little ones, singing in the choir, playing a musical instrument in worship, encouraging the inactive members in our congregation. How can I give the best of what I have, because I am no longer satisfied with giving God my leftovers...

So I ask you again, what are your priorities? They change, don't they? If you go from being single to married, priorities change. Now have children, priorities change... Now the kids are out of the house and you have grandchildren. Priorities change. I pray that some priorities stay the same for you, that your first and foremost priority is to your Lord and Savior. I pray that he grant it to you for his mercy's sake. Amen.