

Giving and the Blessing of God
(Stewardship, giving, money)

Malachi 3:7-12
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Most people who have been around churches very long know that "tithing" has to do with money - specifically giving your own money to the church.

Because preachers receive their income from the church offerings, anytime preachers talk about money it can sound rather self-serving.

Incidentally for those who are uninitiated - pastors in this church get only some of the money that is given on Sundays and only that part that the congregation decides each year they will get - we don't get a percentage and we don't work on commission.

But nonetheless it can sound self-serving for preachers to talk about money.

And if not self-serving then at least institution-serving - getting money out of you for the church.

For that and other reasons I want all within the sound of my voice who are not Christians to hear clearly that this sermon is not preached at you or with you in mind.

If you are not trusting in Jesus Christ as Saving Lord, if you do not consider yourself a Christ-follower, then this instruction from Malachi is not for you.

You can relax, eaves drop if you care to but understand the message is to those who call themselves Christians, God's people.

A quick reading of the paragraph reveals the straight-forward meaning of the text:

The Problem: God's people are robbing God of what is rightfully His.

The Result: As a result they are under a curse - Life isn't going as they would like or as God wished for them.

The Solution: If, however, they will change their ways and begin to give to God, as they should, God will bless them richly.

Now if you had been Malachi what response would you obviously be seeking from the people? What would you want them to do as a result of this message from God?

They would tithe. They would give to God that portion of their income that God had commanded.

But don't you expect those first readers would have had some of the same difficulties believing this text that we have today?

I can just hear them: "Hey Preacher, get real! We didn't just get off the camel yesterday. We've read about Job - he was a righteous man and he lost everything. Some of your choicest servants lived and died with next to nothing. Do you actually expect us to believe that if we give to God he will "throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that we will not have room enough for it"?

I suspect I have something in common with Malachi.

I think much of my audience is as skeptical as was his.

But lest you think me self-righteous, I would quickly add, at times I share some of that skepticism.

What then are we to make of such a passage of Scripture?

Will you look at it more closely with me?

Let's start with v. 7, the PROBLEM. (READ)

Malachi here gives us a summary statement of all he has challenged the people with in the previous chapters. He declares they are not truly followers of God.

They have entered into worship in an intermittent and hollow way.

They have set their hearts on their own desires rather than on knowing and obeying God.

They have entered into the deepest of relationships, even marriage, with those who do not care about God.

They have treated as worthless their relationship to God by illegally breaking their marriage covenants.

But God in His mercy calls out once again, as he has done for generations:
"Return to me and I will return to you"

Renew your commitment to follow my leading, obey my commands, seek me with your whole heart and I will restore the relationship.

But in the height of ignorance or arrogance listen to the people respond:

"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"

What have we done wrong? From what do we need to return?

Like a child challenged by his parent so these people answer a charge with a question: Me! What did I do wrong?

The question is asked to counter the charge - to suggest the authority doesn't know what he's talking about.

The question is asked to stifle conviction. We don't want to consider what has been charged so we ask a question to distract not only the authority but to distract ourselves.

They took it as an affront when Malachi tells them their faults.
They are offended that the prophet should tell them to change.
Like Saul, before the road to Damascus experience, they had been "kicking against the goads" - resisting the conviction of the Holy Spirit.

They were so ignorant of their own sinful hearts that they saw nothing to repent of.

A wise Bible scholar said, "Many ruin their own souls by intentionally distorting the calls (of God) to repent of their sins."
(Matthew Henry p 1495)

Look at verse 8: READ

God in essence asks:
Do you wonder how you are to return?
Do you wonder what you have done wrong?
 Let me tell you.

Now remember God has already spelled out several things that were tragically true of these people.

But here he is about to give them something so tangible, so immediate, it ought to shock them into a realization of how far from God they truly are.

God asks a question: "Will a man rob God?"

Does a man or a woman have the audacity to steal from the God of the universe what belongs to Him alone?

Could anyone be so foolish as to rob God?

Then he answers his own question: Yes, you.

As unimaginable as it is for someone to rob God, yet you rob me.

What we hear next is another of those "smoke screen" questions:

"How do we rob you, God?"

They act incredulous.

They act as if they have no idea what God could be talking about.

God we're your people. We're here, we're reading your word.

Surely you're talking about those people who don't believe in you.
"How do we rob you, God?"

God's answer is short, making it as pointed as a spear:
How do you rob God? "In tithes and offerings"
- By withholding the offerings that belong to Him.

In both the Old and New Testaments, under both the old covenant and the new covenant the idea was the same: A grateful heart results in a generous hand.

Under the Old Covenant - in the Old Testament - that generosity was spelled out:
The people of God were to give 10%, sometimes 20% and sometimes 30% of
their income to the work of ministry.
And after that they were to make their freewill offerings.

And just because it was required didn't mean it could be given any less willingly.
Parents are required to care for their children.
I hope that doesn't mean they must do so unwillingly and grudgingly.

Under the New Covenant - in the New Testament - that generosity is also spelled out: The people of God are to give regularly and proportionally.

Paul told the Corinthians they were to give regularly "on the first day of the week"
- Sunday.

He also instructed them to give proportionally "in keeping with your income."
And then Paul spells out the same attitude as expressed in the Old
Testament: God's people are not to give grudgingly or as if under
compulsion but cheerfully, with a willing heart.

A grateful heart results in a generous hand!

But these ungrateful hearts, these untrusting hearts were robbing God of the tithes and
offerings belonging to Him.

They were not bringing God the whole tithe, they were bringing only a part or
none at all.

They were commanded to bring the best of what they had, not the lame or
the diseased. But if they brought anything it was after they had taken the
best for themselves.

They were commanded to bring the first of what they received, not the
last. But if they brought anything it was what they had left over.

The comment, "I can't afford to give" is an insight right into left-over

giving not first-fruit giving.

The RESULT of their disobedience is given in v 9. (READ)

Their fields didn't produce the crops they should have.

Their cattle didn't grow and reproduce as they could.

They found themselves scrounging for a living and anxious about tomorrow.

Am I suggesting that all financial hard times are a result of God's curse on us?

Absolutely not. That is not at all what God is teaching here.

What is being taught is if you walk away from God, God loves you enough to get your attention.

If you rob from God, He will discipline you.

And like us, so for the Israelites, worst of all, even what they did have wasn't satisfying.

Life, even for the wealthiest of them, was flat if not miserable.

They had stopped trusting God and had pulled away from their relationship to Him.

In their selfishness over what they did have and in their anxiety over what they didn't have they decided they could manage their affairs better on their own. (quickly to next page)

They took the heart out of life - they took a relationship with God out of life.
And the result was emptiness.

Instead of steadfastly pursuing God, faithfully obeying Him - they abandoned Him.

They lived under a self-induced curse.

In verse 10, God still speaking, gives them the REMEDY for their poverty of heart and body. (READ)

Just in case the language of this verse is strange to you consider this:

The "whole tithe" means all that God commanded them to bring and with the attitude of gratefulness.

The "storehouse" was just that - a storage area where they brought their offerings.

"That there may be food in my house" is speaking of the fact that what the people brought was their income - and their income was crops and cattle.

They were to bring at least 1/10 of their produce to the Tabernacle because those grains, wine and cattle were what the priests, at God's direction, lived on, it

was literally their food. .

The simple teaching is this: if we give as God commands us to, God will pour out his blessing on us in such measure that we won't be able to contain it all.

Is that a guarantee?

Is that an automatic, cause and effect, mechanistic quid pro quo - I put money in and God puts money out?

No! It cannot be that.

That defies experience. We all know godly people who have never experienced wealth.

Even Jesus had no place to lay his head.

Not only does such a mechanical view of this verse defy experience it also violates relationship.

Relationships don't work in a mechanistic, automatic, cause and effect way.

Let me try to explain that:

God had made a covenant with his people.

All God owes us for our sin is judgment,

Nonetheless He graciously offers us a relationship with Himself.

He said He would save us, keep us and be our God.

In this relationship to Him we would experience peace of mind both in the present and the future because of the solemn promises of God,

we would experience joy over being so intimately loved by God,

we would experience purpose at being part of so large and enduring a plan as the Kingdom of God.

These benefits are not commodities, things that God will send to us as if they were packages arriving by mail.

These benefits can only be experienced through the connection of relationship - through knowing, trusting and walking with God.

God does not want His people just to get things, He wanted us to have the very source of those things - Himself.

We know that about relationships don't we?

Being a father or a mother is not just providing a house, clothing,

education and discipline. It is belonging to and connecting with another human being. It is truly loving and caring and shaping actions based on that love.

That's what God desires. He has called us to be in relationship to Him.

He has granted us forgiveness through Christ.

He gives us peace, joy and purpose.

He promises to lovingly meet our needs - knowing better than we do what we need both now and for eternity.

As evidences of our response to his grace we are to follow and obey Him.

And as evidence of our trust in Him we are commanded among other things specifically to give to the Lord the first and best of everything we received.

These verses are not ultimately about giving offerings as if God had any need of them nor even about our receiving material wealth from God.

These verses are about God's integrity and our trust.

The deepest issues are whether God is trustworthy and whether we will trust Him.

Do you remember the passage we looked at last week - Mal 2:17 - 3:6?

What was the issue?

The people were saying doing good or evil makes no difference.

There is no justice.

Believing in God makes no difference in life.

They didn't trust God. What they saw right before their unbelieving eyes was so much clearer to them than God's provision and promises that they said - God doesn't matter.

God responds to their unbelief by declaring that He is coming and when He comes he will bring justice with him.

All wrongs will be righted.

The right will be vindicated.

The faithful will experience the reward of their perseverance.

Look now at the section of Scripture that follows the passage we are looking at today: Mal 3:13 - 4:3.

What is the issue?

Look at v 14: "It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements...evildoers prosper."

It's the same issue!

They didn't trust God. The injustices around them yelled so much louder than the promises of God that they stopped believing Him.

But again, God responds to their unbelief by declaring that he is coming again and those who are faithful will understand it was worth it.

Read verse 18, "And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."

God has sandwiched this section about tithing, about giving, right in the midst of this larger issue of his integrity and our trust.

Are we having trouble trusting God with the ultimate issues of life?
Do we find it hard to believe that justice will finally prevail?
Is it difficult for us to just be faithful when the reward seems so distant - when Christ comes again?

I think God is responding to that and is, in these verses suggesting a tangible, "right now, experiment. God says "test me".

Try me in something right here and now.

Give out of what you have, be it ever so small.
Give generously and gratefully.

We are called on to trust him in something fairly small compared to eternity.
He's not even asking us to give all of it, just a portion.

And God will have an opportunity to show you his credibility, his trustworthiness.
He promises to pour out his blessing.
You will experience his favor.
You will see and understand that God keeps his promises - He will meet your needs.

Does that mean he will make you wealthy? Maybe, maybe not.
It won't matter. You will experience his favor and will say as will those around you - that person lives under the favor of God

Does that mean you'll have everything you ever wanted?
When you experience God's presence and favor you may find that what you want then is quite different than now.

Doesn't every true Christian understand that to be Mother Theresa is far more satisfying than being Donald Trump.

Who today wouldn't rather be John the Baptist than Herod the Great?

God says, "test Me." His integrity will be established and your trust will grow.

Have you, in unbelief and fear, been robbing God?

Are you living under a self-induced curse?

Whether in plenty or in want - is it hollow?

Would you take God at his word in this small matter - Test Him -

Give cheerfully, generously, regularly and proportionally -

And see what God will do.