

## For the Blessings of Obedience

Malachi 3:6-12

After the doctor thoroughly examined his patient, he said, “I have some good news and some bad news. The good news is that your vitals are strong. The bad news is, according to your weight, you’re not nearly as tall as you should be.” When we go to the doctor with an ailment, he pokes and prods you in various locations. All the while, he is asking, “Does this hurt?” “How about this?” If the poking and prodding does not bother you, there is likely nothing wrong with you. However, if that same poking and prodding causes you to wince, or to jump or to say, “Oww!” it is because something hurts, which is the evidence that something is not as it should be.

I think this explains why some people don’t like sermons on stewardship and giving. It hurts, but the only reason that makes sense for being touchy about the issue is poor health in that area. We shouldn’t be touchy. If we love the teachings of Jesus, then we should know that He spoke to money matters more than He spoke to any other matter. Sixteen of His thirty-eight parables address how money and material possessions are to be handled. Prayer and faith seem to be more spiritual issues (*i.e.* more important), but while the Bible commits about 500 verses to prayer and less than that to faith, more than 2000 verses address money and money attitudes. In the Gospels, Jesus spoke about money twice as much as He talked about heaven and hell combined.

“All the church is interested in is my money!” That’s what the cynics say. Maybe they’re right. Or, just possibly, given the amount of attention that the Bible gives to the matter, we should conclude that God knows that a man’s relationship with material wealth is the most reliable external indicator of the devotion of his heart. God sees our hearts and our passion for Him. We, on the other hand, tend to favorably deceive ourselves in this matter of passion, so looking at our own money habits can be useful to us for securing a truer glimpse of our own hearts.

Our text this morning includes one of the Old Testament’s most familiar passages on giving. But that which the text has to say about stewardship falls within a larger context. God’s chosen people have struggled to live according to their covenant with YAHWEH. They were prone to rebellion. Disobedience disqualified them from the blessings of the covenant relationship.

### I. The Rebel Spirit (6, 7)

<sup>6</sup>“I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. <sup>7</sup>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?”

#### A. All Human Hope Rests in God’s Unchanging Nature

Martin Luther once said, “If I were God I would knock the world to pieces!” Luther was conceding that he was less patient with faithless people than God is. Fortunately for us, God binds Himself to His Word. He made promises to the “descendants of Jacob” and He would never deviate from those promises. After a long history of rebellion against God, Jacob’s children still existed as a nation. It was only because God is God that they were not utterly destroyed. He promised to bless them and to bring a blessing to the entire world through them.

Because of His promise to Israel, God sent Jesus into the world. Today, whether or not you have any tie to national Israel, by faith in Jesus you are an heir to God's promises. Of course, we do not always live faithfully. By all rights, God could destroy us or, at the very least, have nothing to do with us. But, He has also promised that the atoning blood of Jesus is greater than our sin. He has promised to never leave us. Because God is perfect love unchanging, not only does He endure us, He also waits for us to turn to Him as He faithfully shapes us into the image of Jesus.

## **B. Much Human Grief Emerges from Our Own Fickle Natures**

God does not change, but His children seldom remain on a single straight path. Jacob's children still existed as a nation due to God's unchanging faithfulness, but they were not living in the fullness of His blessings, for promises of prosperity were also bound to His Word. He said that prosperity would be contingent upon the nation's obedience and loyalty to Him. They were never consistently obedient. He said, "Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them." To have blessed an indifferent and rebellious people would have set God on a course contrary to His expressed Word.

The crux of Judah's meager existence was its own unfaithfulness. That is why God said, "Return to me, and I will return to you." The command could also be rendered, "Repent!" or "Turn around!" But in the blindness of self-righteousness, they asked, "What are you talking about, Lord?" "Repent of what?" "How are we to return?" "We haven't done anything wrong. We don't bow to foreign Gods. We have rebuilt Your temple. What more do You want?"

We have already addressed many evidences of the rebel spirit of this nation. They had not been kind to others. They had not worshipped God from their hearts. They had trivialized their marital oaths as they capriciously divorced the "wives of their youth" in order to take foreign brides. The evidences of their rebelliousness and of their need to repent abounded. But now, Malachi turns his attention to what is perhaps the most basic evidence of all that God was not trusted and honored. The nation was disobedient to Him in the matter of tithes and offerings.

## **II. The Robber Spirit (8, 9)**

<sup>8</sup>"Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How do we rob you?'

"In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup>You are under a curse - the whole nation of you - because you are robbing me ...

### **A. Robbing God Logically Follows Ignoring Him**

"You need to repent!" says the LORD. "How do we need to repent?" the people reply. For starters, says the LORD, "Stop ripping me off! Where are my tithes and offerings?" For these Old Covenant Jews, this was more than a matter of just failing to reflect a high priority for God in matters of generosity. They were disobeying a clear command of God. He accused His people of "robbing" Him because He had already demanded for Himself a tithe and certain offerings.

" ~ A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD. - Leviticus 27:30

The tithe was one-tenth of everything the Israelites produced. The tribe of the Levites never received a land allotment when the Israelites entered into the Land of Promise in the days of Joshua. They were the priestly tribe. They served in the tabernacle and later in the temple. The national tithe was God's way of insuring that they were supported and that there were always resources on hand for the work of the temple. This was God's share, and if the people held it back, the spiritual consequences could not help but to reverberate throughout the land.

When Nehemiah governed these repatriates in Jerusalem that had returned from Babylon, he was compelled to address the practical consequences of a nation that had robbed God of the tithe:

<sup>10</sup>I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields. <sup>11</sup>So I rebuked the officials and asked them, "Why is the house of God neglected?" Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.

<sup>12</sup>All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms. – Nehemiah 13:10-12

Worship and normal temple activity broke down because the people were not doing their part. Malachi fussed at the priests when their spiritual lethargy set a bad example for the community. Now, his ire is directed at the nation as a whole. "You are under a curse – the whole nation of you – because you are robbing me ..." Usually, when God addressed His people, He called them "My people," "Israel," "Jacob's descendants" or something that smacked of a covenant relationship. This word for "nation" was typically reserved for Israel's pagan neighbors and it must have had a chilling ring to it when Malachi used the word to refer to the covenant nation.

The curse at hand was not plague or pestilence, but barrenness. Earlier, when the people had gotten sidetracked from their loyalty to God, another prophet, Haggai, described such a curse:

"You have planted much, but have harvested little. You eat, but never have enough. You drink, but never have your fill. You put on clothes, but are not warm. You earn wages, only to put them in a purse with holes in it." – Haggai 1:6

Nothing prospers as it should for God's people when He is on their back burner. This was true throughout Israel's history. It is true still. And, in spite of our eloquent words about spiritual matters, nothing quite tells the story of our spiritual passion as how we spend our resources

## **B. Does God Really Just Want My Money?**

An old time evangelist passed the hat for an offering, but it came back embarrassingly empty. He shook the hat to demonstrate that it was empty. Then, he then lifted his eyes to heaven and prayed loudly, "I thank thee, O Lord, that I got my hat back from this congregation."

Now follow this: God said, "Return to Me!" The people asked, "What does that look like?" God answered, "Bring money!" Isn't that all the proof the cynics of this age need who say that the church is only after people's money? But while the Mosaic laws governing the tithe couched the issue in terms of obedience, the New Testament concept of stewardship raises new issues. When considering how much money one should give to God's mission in the world, stewardship reminds us:

**1) You don't have any money.** A steward understands that God owns everything. It is a trust committed to us to manage all of God's things in such a fashion that He is glorified in the earth and that His work is coming to pass in the world. One day as people were dropping their gifts to God in the trumpet-shaped offering boxes on the temple grounds, Jesus took notice of a poor widow who dropped in two small copper coins. Then, He commended her to His disciples:

<sup>43</sup>Calling his disciples to him, Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. <sup>44</sup>They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything - all she had to live on." - Mark 12:43, 44

To think that dropping some specific sum of money in an offering plate fulfills our obligation to God is as misguided as concluding that we can save ourselves by works. Stewardship is the management of 100% of our lives, resources, time, strength and abilities under God's scrutiny. Only when that is clearly understood can we begin to experience what the life of faith is all about. And, only when that is understood will we begin to manage God's provisions in our lives in a fashion that reflects that we see ourselves as participants in the Father's business in this world.

**2) What more apt measure of faith in God is there than our material generosity?** Our usage of resources tells a host of stories about the things in life that are most important to us whether those things be luxuries, amusements and recreations or whether those things are the needs of others and the steady advance of God's kingdom. The Bible has much to say on this matter not because God needs what we have, for it is His already, but because how we handle our resources is the most authentic measure of the true passions of our hearts. Jesus said, "For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Paul was not embarrassed to speak of our generosity as a way to "test the sincerity of your love" (2 Corinthians 8:8).

So, how do we rob God today? The New Testament never addresses our generosity in terms of some precise percentage. It does mention that our giving should reflect how God has blessed us and that it should be sacrificial and systematic. However, the overwhelming bulk of New Testament teaching on giving addresses our attitude. We rob God by giving grudgingly, for God loves a cheerful giver. If the spirit is wrong, the truest blessings of generosity can never be realized. We rob God by scanty giving. If there is no true aspect of sacrifice, I suppose every penny helps a cause, but how can such miserly giving ever bless the human soul?

### **III. The Repentant Spirit (10-12)**

#### **A. God Blesses Obedient People verses 10, 11**

... <sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty ...

There is a practical dimension to obedience in this matter of giving God His due. Resources are available for God's work. When the "whole tithe" was brought "into the storehouse" (storage chambers in the temple), there was food in God's house. That meant that the priests and the Levites did not have to filter off into other occupations in order to survive. That meant that the prescribed sacrifices were always on hand for the worship rituals of the temple. That meant that there was always a stockpile of commodities on hand to care for emergency benevolent needs. By the same token, any church whose membership is always seeking to mature in the grace of giving will always have adequate resources to make a difference in the world around it.

But, there is also a spiritual dimension to obedience in this matter of giving. Whenever we do all that we can do, God steps in and does what only He can do. To these Jews, He said, "Test me in this ..." JEHOVAH promised that He would bless His people in material ways. The growing season would be more ideal and the harvest more plentiful. He would pour out His blessings. The promises to the Christian are not so specific, but there is still a recurring theme that what we keep for ourselves will be more than what it would have been had we not given God His due.

<sup>10</sup>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. <sup>11</sup>You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God. – 2 Corinthians 9:10, 11

We don't always know how God might enrich us for our generosity. A little old lady was a soft touch for any panhandler she met on the street. One day she met a shabbily dressed man and impulsively pressed a \$5 bill into his hand, smiled and whispered, "God speed." The next day the man knocked at her door said, "Here's your \$100. Godspeed came in first and paid twenty to one."

For some, this promise of being made "rich in every way" may very well present itself as a material increase to make an even bigger difference for the kingdom. For others, this richness may be a realization that comes with contentment - that we don't require nearly what we once thought we required. Those who preach a "get rich" gospel step beyond what the Scriptures promise, but this much is clear: God will always make the generous giver rich enough to continue to be generous, for generosity of spirit is not a matter of how many resources you control. A generous spirit is a character trait wrought in you by the Holy Spirit. And God's invitation in this matter still stands, "Test me in this matter and see if I don't bless you mightily."

## **B. God Is Glorified through Faithful People verse 12**

... <sup>12</sup>"Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Later, Paul would say about free-will generosity something quite similar to what Malachi said about obedience regarding the tithe: "your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God" (2 Corinthians 9:11). There is something about open-handed, sacrificial generosity that not only brings blessing to God's people, but also results in glory being given to God by those outside of God's community looking in. The world notices a blessed, content and joyful people. The world also notices a people who are passionate for their God. A people passionate for God cannot help but be a generous people, for true godliness and generosity go hand in hand. Christ proves that:

<sup>9</sup>For 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. – 2 Corinthians 8:9

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