

Robbing God
Malachi 3:6-12
Pastor Jason Van Bommel

⁶ “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ ⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. ¹⁰ Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

- Malachi 3:6-12

How Do We Measure Our Spiritual Lives?

How do you measure a basketball player’s overall effectiveness? You can talk about points scored, rebounds grabbed, steals, assists, and blocks, but these are just pieces of the whole. Lately, stats have focused somewhat on a player’s +/- rating, which is how many more points a player’s team scores than their opponent with that player on the floor. This is supposed to account for players who have a huge impact on the game that isn’t necessarily measured by the other stats. One of the best players in this category is Joel Embiid, whose presence on the court makes a huge impact for the Sixers.

Hard-core sports fans tend to be somewhat obsessed with stats, but some things in life cannot be measured statistically. In fact, most of the truly meaningful things in life can’t be reduced to numbers or a formula. Love, marriage, parenting, contentment, neighborliness, job satisfaction, and friendship are just a few of the truly worthwhile things in life that can’t be analyzed with statistical data. What about our spiritual lives?

Surely our spiritual lives cannot be measured with statistics either, and yet that’s not to say that the Bible gives us no indicators of the health of our relationship with God. People tend to fall into one of two errors when it comes to self-assessment of their spiritual lives: One is to be a kind of box-checking Pharisee: If I read my Bible daily, attend church weekly, give 10% of my income, and refrain from the really big sins, then I am a strong, healthy, growing Christian. Well, not necessarily. We can do all of these things without truly loving God, trusting Him, and living a life of grateful obedience from the heart, can’t we? On the other hand, many modern Americans have fallen into a very different trap, of judging their spiritual lives entirely by their subjective emotions. They would say they are strong Christians because they have sincere feelings about God, even though they don’t attend church regularly, rarely read their Bible, don’t really give to the church, and basically live as they please. But because they pray and feel good about God, they think they’re doing really well.

Jesus said, *“If you love me, you will keep my commandments.”* It is both love for God and sincere, heartfelt obedience to His commands which flows from that love which God seeks in His people.

I. Return to Me, v. 7

In Malachi 3, after God affirms His unchanging nature, character, and covenant, He calls His people to turn back to Him:

“For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.

This is a gracious invitation, and it reminds me of something I remember seeing on a bumper sticker years ago: “If you feel far from God, guess who moved?” God has not moved and He cannot move from His perfections. Yet His gracious invitation to His people is clear: “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.”

This is a covenant invitation from God to His people. It is really only possible as His grace draws us to seek Him. This gracious call from God is repeated several times in Scripture. In Jeremiah 29, in Jeremiah’s letter from the LORD to the community of exiles living in Babylon, God says –

For I know the plans I have for you, declares the Lord, plans for welfare and not for evil, to give you a future and a hope. Then you will call upon me and come and pray to me, and I will hear you. You will seek me and find me, when you seek me with all your heart. I will be found by you, declares the Lord – Jeremiah 29:11-14

Last week in worship, we read through Psalm 27, which expresses David’s singular longing for the LORD:

*You have said, “Seek my face.”
My heart says to you,
“Your face, LORD, do I seek.”
Hide not your face from me.
Turn not your servant away in anger,
O you who have been my help.
Cast me not off; forsake me not,
O God of my salvation!
For my father and my mother have forsaken me,
but the LORD will take me in. – Psalm 27:8-10, ESV*

And yet here in Malachi, God’s people do not respond to His gracious invitation with ready obedience but with a ready question: *But you say, ‘How shall we return?’*

This is not a question asking for direction and guidance, but a question challenging the reason why they should have to return to the LORD. It could be translated, “Why do we need to return?” or “What reason do we have for needing to return?”

God has already spoken to them about their half-hearted, lukewarm worship, reflected in their blind, lame sacrifices and about their marital infidelity, but still they did not think of themselves as really needing to change direction completely. Maybe they needed to be more earnest in their worship, more faithful in the quality of their sacrifices, and maybe they needed to deal better with their wives in their marriages, but to “return” to the LORD would indicate a total turning around, that they had actually

turned away from Him. What reason would the LORD have for thinking such harsh things about His people. After all, nobody's perfect, right? But why would they need to turn around and turn back?

We can always tell when we're stuck in a self-righteous, hypocritical state of sin when we buck against God's gracious invitation to repent and turn to Him. As we grow in Christ, we come to see what Martin Luther famously said in the first of his 95 Theses, what may be regarded as the very first words of the Protestant Reformation in 1517: "When our Lord and Master Jesus Christ said, "Repent" (Matthew 4:17), he willed the entire life of believers to be one of repentance."

2. Stop Robbing Me, vv. 8-9

God answers His people's challenging question with a challenging question of His own. This is something Jesus did repeatedly in His earthly ministry – answer an objecting or skeptical question with another question. Here, God's question is very strong:

Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. (3:8-10, ESV)

God tells His people they are robbing Him. Now, it seems impossible that a man could rob God, and so the people want to know how this is even possible and how they could have done it.

I like a good heist movie, one where a group of highly skilled and intelligent people pull off the impossible robbery. But how in the world could anyone break into the vaults of heaven and rob God?

This robbery happens very simply when God entrusts something to our care and we think it actually belongs to us. God tells His people they have robbed Him in tithes and offerings and commands them to bring the full tithe into the storehouse, but the issue is a deeper one than the amount of difference between what they were bringing and what God required. Whenever you get into this issue of tithes and offerings, people always want to know an amount: How much do I have to give?

A while ago, I watched an old video from Christian singer-songwriter Keith Green, who passed away in 1982. In a concert, he was talking about when he first learned from his pastor about tithing, and his first reaction was "Wow! I have to give 10% of my income to God. That's so much. Ouch." But then he had another thought, "Well, I only have to give 10%, and that means I get to keep 90%. Yes! It's mine." And that's when it hit him that it all belongs to God, and the tithe was the way of demonstrating by faith the truth that everything we have comes from God and is to be used for God and His glory. It is all His. We are just given the joyous privilege of managing it.

This is what Jesus taught in His parables, especially in the parable of the talents. One servant is given 5 talents, another 2 talents, and another 1 talent. After some time, the master comes and demands an accounting for what they have done with his money.

Christian author Randy Alcorn puts it this way in his book *Money, Possession, and Eternity*: "...tithing isn't something I do to clear my conscience so I can do whatever I want with the 90 percent--it also belongs

to God! I must seek his direction and permission for whatever I do with the full amount. I may discover that God has different ideas than I do.”

The principle of tithing, which seems to be an assumed principle in Scripture, beginning in the book of Genesis, is later explicitly commanded in several forms in the Law of Moses. The principle is that we give the first 10% to God as a sign of faith that the whole belongs to Him and is given to us by Him as a gracious gift and a trust, and that we are stewards in the Lord’s household.

We see this principle at work when Abraham returns from battle in Genesis 14, after rescuing Lot and is greeted by Melchizedek, the King of Salem (Jerusalem) and a priest of God Most High. Melchizedek blesses Abraham, and Abraham gives Melchizedek a tithe in Gen. 14:20. Then, we later see Jacob make a vow to God, that if God will bless him and keep him, he will in turn honor God: *“of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you.”* (Gen. 28:22)

Now, some people say that you can’t take these two isolated incidents and infer that the tithe was a requirement in the days of the Patriarchs before the Law of Moses. But I think these two stories show us that it was understood by the Patriarchs that the tithe, giving a tenth (and tithe just means “tenth”), was a standard measure for giving thanks and showing honor to God for His goodness.

In the Law of Moses, the tithe laws are tied to the agricultural economy and to the Levitical priesthood. So, some people have rightly said that the tithe seems to belong to the ceremonial law, as it was used to sustain the Temple worship and the Levitical priesthood. In fact, God commanded a Tabernacle tax of a fixed amount per person that would support the Tabernacle and the later Temple, providing for the maintenance and upkeep of God’s house. He also commanded tithes for the Levites and the priests, so they could be provided for as they taught the people, cared for the Tabernacle and Temple, and led in the worship of God. In addition, the people were expected to give alms to care for the poor and to contribute to offerings as needed for special projects.

Here in Malachi, the people are rebuked for robbing God when they have withheld the tithes and the offerings. The exact contours of these tithes and offerings did change when we passed from the Old Covenant of Moses to the New Covenant in Jesus. But the underlying principles remained the same. We can break down the giving into three categories: tithe, offerings, and alms. Tithe is the regular, consistent giving to support the work and worship of the church. Offerings are for special projects or tasks. Alms are to care for the poor.

So, the question everyone seems to want to ask is: Is the tithe still commanded at 10% in the New Testament age, under the New Covenant in Jesus? In the New Testament, we don’t find any specific amount named. But Paul makes this connection from Old Covenant Temple worship to New Testament Gospel work in 1 Corinthians 9:13-14 – *“Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.”* (ESV)

And Galatians 6:6 says, *“Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.”* This is language which also echoes the Temple sacrifice system, for when a worshipper brought an offering to the Temple, some of the sacrifice would be consumed by fire, some would be given to the

priests, and then some would be given back to the worshiper. Thus, the priest and the worshiper would share in the good gift from the altar.

So, while we don't have a specific New Testament command to give 10% as a tithe, we do have evidence that the same principles of giving apply – regular, consistent giving to support the worship and work of the church, alms for the poor and needy (for widows and orphans in distress) and occasional special offerings. When we ask how much the regular, consistent giving should be, the guidance of wisdom we get from the Scriptures is 10%.

John Piper, in his “Ask Pastor John” feature, gives this as part of his response to a question about tithing:

Now at the end of the day, as Don Carson likes to say, I would say we should value our riches in Christ in this new covenant relationship so highly, and our freedom from sin so highly, and our gospel so highly, that we would simply love to give. Jesus said it is more blessed to give than to receive ([Acts 20:35](#)). And we would be free from a love of things, and a dependence on things, and we would out give those who lived under the law because we have a better covenant and a better promise. Everything is greater with Christ. Why wouldn't giving be greater?

So, I think I preached on tithing two or three times in 33 years at Bethlehem. I mean I talked about giving and sacrifice all the time, but as far as tithing goes . . . and when I did, I think the gist of it was: Brothers and sisters, why would we want to do less? I mean, the person who is saying: *Do I have to?* They are getting off on the wrong foot immediately. Everything is greater in the new covenant. We have better promises, a better covenant – Hebrews says – why wouldn't there be better sacrifice, better giving?

So, hopefully, you'll see us trying to follow the basic Biblical pattern for giving here at Forest Hill: Regular tithes for the work and worship of the church according to the budget set by the elders and deacons, occasional Minuteman for Mercy calls, which are basically alms to meet specific financial hardship needs, and then special offerings for mission trips and things like that. We think this is a pattern in keeping with Biblical principles and wisdom.

3. Please Test Me, vv. 10-12

God follows His call to bring in the full tithe into the storehouse with a very unusual invitation, to put Him to the test:

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts.

You might be thinking: I thought we weren't supposed to put God to the test. Didn't Jesus rebuke Satan's second temptation by saying, “It is written, ‘You shall not put the Lord your God to the test?’” Yes, we should not take it upon ourselves to put God to the test. That is an act of skepticism and doubt. But here God is inviting His people to put Him to the test. In fact, the language is strong, as if God is saying, “Please put me to the test” or “Put me to the test now.”

This is a rare invitation, but God is calling us as His people to not only return to Him but also to test Him and see if He is not faithful to His promises. Many people can tell stories of God's faithfulness in this area of life. One sermon I listened to this week told the story of a young couple working for a Christian school who decided they needed to be tithing their firstfruits, and so they pledged to write their first check out of each paycheck as a tithe to the Lord. When they first did this, they were left with just \$20 for food for the month after they tithed and paid all of their bills. They prayed and trusted the Lord. They could eat lunch at their school, and that first month, they were invited out to eat with families from their school or their church for 21 of the 30 days of the month. In addition to that, people brought them food several times, though they never asked for it. That began a lifetime of tithing and seeing God provide for them.

John D. Rockefeller, America's first billionaire, said, "I never would have been able to tithe the first million dollars I ever made if I had not tithed my first salary, which was \$1.50 per week."

Now, I am not saying that if you tithe to God, God will make you a billionaire. That's ridiculous and unbiblical. God makes no such promises. But He does call us to bring the full tithe into the storehouse so that His house (the church) may be well supplied, and that He will bless and provide for His people abundantly. I think this is primarily spiritual blessings in joy and peace and fruitfulness, which is what matters most for eternity and brings the greatest satisfaction. But I don't think it's Biblical to over-spiritualize it and exclude God's earthly blessings from the picture of what He gives His children.

Generosity for the Sake of the Nations

God closes this section with an emphasis and blessing that is perhaps unexpected: the nations – "*Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*"

I think this means several things, including that the testimony of the church before a watching world is seen in part by how generously we give and how we don't worship money and hoard it all for ourselves. We are blessed by God to be generous and distinctly different from the world in how we manage what God entrusts to our care.

But I also think we can see that the Gospel will advance to the nations and the nations will come to know the blessings of God's kingdom more readily the more generous God's people are to His kingdom work.

The late Larry Burkett was a financial teacher who helped many Christians figure out how to be better stewards of the financial resources God has entrusted to us. He used to say that God has given the American church enough resources that we could easily fulfill the calling of the Great Commission within a single generation, if only we were faithful to God's commands. We do not lack the resources to get the Gospel to everyone; we only lack the generosity and the courage.

Wouldn't it be wonderful to see the Gospel reach to every tribe, tongue, people and nation? Wouldn't it be wonderful for the nations, for the world, to see the blessings of the kingdom of God in His church? God says, "*Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.*"

