

Are we robbing, or are we returning?

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[0 : 00] My friends, did you know that a tie is not a debt we owe, but a seed to be sown? Tiding is the key to financial blessing. Malachi 3 verse 10 says, Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my mouth.

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 there will be not enough room to store it.

Did you hear that? And did you know that the Hebrew word for floodgates is also the same Hebrew word used back in Genesis to describe God flooding the earth?

He wants to flood you with the blessing of money, but not just money, since life is more than just money, but also with good experiences and good things. Now we love the blessing part, don't we church?

But don't forget the first part. We have to be faithful and obedient first of all to tithe. After all, faith without works is dead. So make sure that you activate your seed faith.

[1 : 06] If you don't give at least 10% of your income to God, then you are robbing God. And you have no seed. If you have no seed, you have no harvest. But when you tie, you sow a seed.

And you will reap, for blessing after blessing will overflow. And the bigger the seed, the bigger the harvest. Let me tell you once about this person who gave his entire monthly salary once to church. Do you know what happened next? A few weeks later, he got an unexpected salary raise. And then he won a BMW in a lucky draw. And non-Christians began to remark on God's favor in his life.

That was his miracle offering. And it can be your miracle too. But you must be obedient. You must be faithful. Matthew 9.29 says, According to your faith, let it be done for you.

And don't listen to the people who tell you that tithing is just an old covenant thing. After all, does Malachi 3.6 not say, I, the Lord, do not change.

[2 : 14] I, the Lord, still want your tithe today to unlock my storehouse for you. And so, my friends, do you not want a continuous overflow of God's blessing in your life?

Do you not want the fish and the bread that you offer to Jesus to multiply a hundred times over?

Then do not rob God. Return to God your tithes and offerings or else risk being under a curse that the devil's put on you.

Is what I just preached to you, the message of Malachi 3.6-12, is that what it's all about? Certainly quite a number of preachers think so.

I look at some of their messages this week, and that's how they would teach this part of the Bible.

Perhaps one or two of you saw the title of today's sermon and expected that kind of message.

But as with any passage in Scripture, we want to make sure that we are handling it rightly, reading it in its context, using sound interpretive tools to ensure that we are not misrepresenting God.

[3 : 28] And that's what Paul urged Timothy to do in 2 Timothy 2. And I think that when we take a closer look at Malachi 3.6-12 this morning, we'll see that, yes, those who teach it in this way are not entirely wrong.

There is a grain of truth in what they say, but they've also badly missed the point. And so let's keep our Bibles open. Let's work out what Malachi 3.6-12 is really saying to us.

And let's keep praying that the Holy Spirit will help us understand. And let's begin with a recap to set this passage in its larger context. The people of God have returned from exile.

Many years ago, they have been taken away to Babylon as part of God's judgment on the nation.

But God promised that he would eventually bring them home, and he kept his promise.

But the people are now in dispute with God. Why? Because they've experienced crop failure and drought. They see a lack of glory in their city and especially the temple.

[4 : 43] The hope for prosperity and stability hasn't yet materialized. And so they're disappointed. They complain. And they go through the motions.

They no longer bring their best sacrifices to God. They offer polluted food and defiled animals. The priests no longer teach properly or live blamelessly.

And they stop being faithful to one another. Indeed, they weary God with their words, slandering him, asking, where is this God of justice?

And that's what we've seen over the last three weeks. And so they reveal the condition of their hearts. Their apathy, their accusations, their actions all expose their hearts as bitter towards God, not in love with him.

They're a little like the older brother in the parable of the prodigal that Jesus tells, who says to the father, look, all these years I've been slaving for you and never disobeyed your orders.

[5 : 53] And yet you've never even given me a young goat so I could celebrate with my friends. They see God not as a loving father, but as a harsh slave master.

And so in today's passage, God once again speaks. He answers. And he speaks not so much like a domineering boss who delights in torturing those under his charge.

Rather, he speaks like the father in Jesus' parable, as one who is determined to win back his wayward sons. And so to help us navigate our way through God's speech, I've divided up what God says into three parts.

His declaration, his summons, and his challenge. And so let's begin with his declaration, verse 6. I, the Lord, do not change.

Now what does it mean for God to be unchanging? Well, let's imagine that you've met up with an old friend you haven't seen for a while. As you catch up, talking about the good old times and your family and everything in between, you find yourself thinking, oh, he's changed.

[7 : 08] She's changed. You might mean it positively. Your friend has changed for the better. He seems less anxious, less obsessed about work, and so on.

Or you might mean it negatively. Your friend, you feel, has grown a bigger ego or no longer shares the same interest as you. Human beings by nature are changeable creatures.

We are the ones who cry out, down with Tun Mahathir, the worst prime minister ever, on Monday, and then, come back, Tun, our political saviour, on Tuesday.

We are the ones who cry out, Hosanna, as Jesus comes riding into Jerusalem triumphantly on a donkey, and then crucify him, almost with our very next breath.

But God is not like human beings. Whenever you meet him, you need not worry whether he's still the same person or not.

[8 : 09] He cannot change for the better or the worse. He does not undergo a process of development. He cannot become stronger or wiser or better.

He cannot change, for he is already perfection itself. The theologians call this aspect of God the immutability of God.

Now, immutability does not mean inactivity, as we'll soon see. But it does mean that if God is kind, he will always and forever be kind.

If God is patient, he will always and forever be patient. If God is loving, he will always and forever be loving. And if he is just, he will always and forever be just.

This is the God we worship. We worship. An unchanging God. An immutable God. But why does God feel the need to declare this?

[9 : 15] Well, because the people were essentially accusing him of being like a human being. God, you've changed. We thought we could depend on you, but obviously not.

We thought you're the type of God who could keep his promises, but obviously not. And in reply, God declares, I don't change.

And he backs up his declaration with evidence. Verse 6 again. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

Do you remember the beginning of this book? God told his people, I have loved you. You know that because I have chosen Jacob over Esau.

And that hasn't changed. That's why you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. You're still my treasured possession. You're still my holy nation.

[10 : 14] You are the ones that I've set my heart on as I made a covenant with you. And that's why, God says, you are yet to be swallowed up by the fires of judgment.

For it isn't just God who hasn't changed. God's people, up to this point, haven't changed either. Look at verse 7. Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them.

Over and over again, God declares, you have turned away from my word. This is your consistent pattern. You turn away when Adam and Eve took the forbidden fruit in Eden.

You turn away when the people built the Tower of Babel instead of filling the world. You turn away when you, having just been rescued from Egypt by me, the Lord, made a golden calf and worship it instead.

You turn away as you grumbled in the wilderness and wanted to go back to Egypt instead of entering the Promised Land. You turn away when your great King David committed adultery and murder.

[11 : 30] And your wisest king, Solomon, foolishly married many wives who turned him away to worship other gods. You turn away in Ezekiel's day before the exile by worshipping idols in the temple.

And you're turning away now in Malachi's day after the exile with your half-hearted worship, increasing divorce rates, and your contempt for God's name.

Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. You have certainly not changed.

And yet God's people are not destroyed because God still loves them. He hasn't changed. His promises haven't changed.

He has stayed utterly consistent. He is absolutely just in his character. There's no doubt about that. Was he not just when he banished a rebellious Adam and Eve?

[12 : 36] Was he not just when during Noah's day he cleansed the evil that consumed the world with a flood? Was he not just in banishing his idolatrous people to exile as stated in the terms of the Mosaic Covenant?

And yet, he also remains absolutely committed to his people. Was he not committed when he clothed Adam and Eve and promised them a future hope of a deliverer?

Was he not committed when he told Noah to build an ark to show that he is not done with humanity? And was he not committed when he brought his people back from exile to stay true to his promises to Abraham?

This is what God is like. This is what stands behind his activity of judging and rescuing. He judges and saves not based on his mood swings and changing whims, but because he is utterly committed both to his justice and to the good of his people.

And that comes together supremely on the cross. Is he not just when Jesus hung on the cross bearing our sin so that sin could be punished?

[14 : 04] And is he not good and committed when Jesus hung on the cross bearing our sin to rescue unfaithful people like you and me?

Perhaps some of you need to be reminded of this truth this morning. If you are in Christ know that God is absolutely committed to your good.

That commitment never changes. Your earthly status might change as you go through life from student to worker to retiree having both good and bad times but your heavenly status in Christ never changes.

You are a child of God. Your possessions and fortunes might increase or decrease as you go through life but your final future inheritance in Christ never changes.

And because God is committed to the good of his people even in Malachi's day that's why we now hear his summons. That's the second part of God's speech his summons the seven again.

[15 : 17] return to me and I will return to you says the Lord Almighty. You see if God doesn't change if he is utterly committed to the good of his people then it makes complete sense to return to him.

Come back God says come back to me and it also makes complete sense that he would want to return to you. you see this is not a half-hearted appeal this isn't come back no remember the father again in Jesus' parable when his youngest son returns from self-imposed exile the father runs to him and welcomes him back and if God doesn't change this isn't true just in Luke's gospel but in Malachi as well return to me and I will return to you.

But the people don't respond positively look at the end of verse 7 but you ask how are we to return? You see just like every other time in the book so far there is pushback.

The new living translation of verse 7 captures something of their attitude how can we return when we have never ever gone away? Eh God we've always been here we've been going to the temple offering you sacrifices and so on how can we return if we've never gone away?

And this is quite sobering. I think that we've established in the past few weeks in Malachi that God's people are clearly in the wrong but they still seem to be willfully blind to their sin.

[17:05] They don't seem to realise just how far their hearts are away from God. They have virtually zero self-awareness. This week I was reading about something called Diogenous Syndrome.

It's a behavioural disorder that often affects older adults who end up having bad hygiene and living in dirty homes. And often they have almost no self-awareness of their condition.

They think that their unhygienic practices and their dirty environment is completely normal. Well, Malachi tells us here that God's people can be infected with the spiritual version of Diogenous Syndrome.

It's possible that we've grown so used to being so lukewarm that we think that this is what the normal Christian life is all about. We've become so used to not putting his priorities first, to not fighting sin, to not hungering for his word, that we think, oh yeah, this is how it's meant to be.

We have no self awareness that it actually indicates a spiritual disorder. But God says, you do have a spiritual disorder.

[18:19] Let me show you the symptoms. Verse 8, will a mere mortal rob God? Yet, you rob me. But you ask, how are we robbing you?

In dives and offerings. things? Well, I'm sure all of you know what an ECG test is, right? It shows the electrical activity of your heart to determine whether it's working normally or not.

Well, God says, here's a spiritual ECG test. What are you doing with what you have? What are you doing with what you have?

And that will tell me how your heart's doing. And how were the people doing? Well, let's explore.

The people were meant to be giving their tithes and offerings.

Now, what is a tithe? The word itself comes from an old English word meaning tithe, reflecting the Hebrew word it translates. Hence, its common association with 10%.

[19:22] And it was prescribed in the Mosaic Law. And in the Old Testament, the people aren't tithing primarily cash, sometimes we forget that, but rather they're tithing their grain, fruits, vegetables, or animals.

And there was actually a variety of tithes. Again, this is something many people forget or don't realise. And actually, it's unclear how many tithes there actually are and how to calculate them.

But broadly speaking, we can speak of three different types of tithes, or at least tithes with three different purposes. I put them on your outline, with the accompanying verse references.

Firstly, there was the tithe to support the Levites who served in the temple. You see, the Levites are the only tribe who are not given any land because they are set apart to perform the service of offering sacrifices in the temple.

And so they need to be supported to live. Secondly, there was what's called the festival tithe. This is more like a contribution to a national pot as the people brought their tithes and gathered together in worship around a celebratory meal at the temple in Jerusalem.

[20:41] And thirdly, there was a tithe collected every three years to be distributed to the poor Levite, the needy, and the widow. And so those are the three kinds of tithes.

And now we discover God's people were not giving to God what they owed him. Now it wasn't that they were not giving.

That's not what is happening here. But they were not giving him everything they should. They were not giving him the whole tithe. They were withholding some of it. Just like with the sacrifices a few weeks ago, instead of giving him their best, they were giving him their leftovers.

The tithes in this case, most likely refers to the tithe to support the Levites in the temple. And the fact that they were not properly tithing showed what they taught about its ministry.

Not very highly at all. It revealed that they didn't really care about the temple. They had no real heart to worship God.

[21 : 48] And the heart is what God really cares about. You see, God doesn't really need the tithe. He owns everything.

It's not like he's an elderly man in an aged care home who needs our food and our money and our love to survive. The psalmist says in Psalm 50 verses 9 to 12, God has always been God. He's never changed. He owns everything. He doesn't need anything. He doesn't need to receive. And yet he's given us everything.

Our life, our family, our education, our opportunity to hear the gospel. Everything. everything. And so in one sense, we owe him everything.

Not because we're like a debtor who owes the along who harasses him, but because we're like a drowning man who owes the life guard who saved him.

[23 : 21] When we realize what God has done to preserve us, our hearts are no longer grudging, but grateful. And so we worship him with our everything.

And that's what God is after when he says, return to me. That's the summons. And for the Israelites at that time, that included giving to God the tithes and offerings that they were obligated to under the Mosaic law.

For us today, although it won't look exactly the same for us, as we'll see in a moment, it will include the impact it will make on our wallets.

Because here's the challenge. We move to the third part of God's speech. Verse 10. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that they 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 there will be not enough room to store it.

[24 : 29] Bring it all, God says. Bring the whole tithe. Now, in general, the Bible says, don't put God to the test.

That's sin. But there are occasional times in the Bible when God does give explicit permission to do so. That's exactly what God did last week in Isaiah chapter 7.

Test me and ask me for a sign, he tells King Ahaz. And now, here he makes the same remarkable offer to his people. Test me.

Return to me what you owe, he says, and then let me demonstrate my commitment to you. Return to me by returning the whole tithe, and I will return wholly to you.

In accordance with the Mosaic covenant, God had withheld agricultural or economic blessing because they had been disobedient. But return to me, God says, and your crops and your fields will no longer be devoured by pests or barren.

[25 : 37] That's verses 12 and 13. They will be rich and ripe all over again. For I will send the rain necessary to end the drought.

That phrase, floodgates of heaven, in verse 10, appears four other times in the Old Testament. And every single time, without exception, it is referring to rain.

Once again, it will be a delightful land, God is saying, fertile and full, as God brings the rain back to the land. And just like back in Malachi 1, verse 5, even those beyond the borders of Israel, will cry out, great is the Lord, blessed are you, Israel.

This invitation to return and to test him is nothing but pure grace. It's pure generosity. God could have destroyed his people, but here, he still wants to bless his people.

He doesn't want them to remain disobedient and cursed. He wants them to be gripped by grace and experience the joy of God blessing them.

[26 : 57] But here's the question I know you're all itching to ask. How does Malachi 3, verse 6 to 12 then, apply to us? Especially the giving part? Well, I've tried to summarize it in a sentence, so let me give you that sentence first, and then try to expand on it.

Here it is. Let our giving come from the overflow of a heart, gripped by grace and gratitude. Let our giving come from the overflow of a heart, gripped by grace and gratitude.

But let's expand on this, and let me try to help you step by step to see how we arrive at this application. Number one, remember that we're no longer under the Mosaic covenant, and so the law doesn't apply to us today in the same way it applied to the people in Malachi's day.

As you've no doubt heard me say over and over again if you've been attending this church for a while, whenever we apply any Old Testament passage today, we must apply it through the lens of Christ and his gospel.

The tithes and offerings mentioned in Malachi were prescribed under the Mosaic law. they were part of the old covenant, and so it was part of the covenant obligations for the people back in Malachi's day, and if they disobeyed, they would suffer the covenant curse of barrenness and exile. [28 : 28] But for us today, we are no longer under the old covenant. Indeed, when Jesus came, he said he has come to fulfill the law.

Now, how does he do that? In a number of ways, but here is one of the key ways, Galatians chapter 3, verse 13. Sorry, let me just get that back on the PowerPoint.

Christ redeems us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, for it is written, cursed is everyone who is hung on a pole. Now, up to this point, pole has been saying, all of us fail God.

We fail at giving him what we owe. We don't love God with our whole hearts as we should. We couldn't obey the law. And because of that, we should suffer the curse of death.

But now Jesus has paid the penalty. He took upon himself the curse that sinners deserve and stood in our place. And so Christians are no longer under the curse of the law anymore.

[29 : 34] And so that's already put us in a different place to the Israelites of Malachi's day. we no longer labour with a curse hanging over us. We've set free.

But more than that, Galatians 3 24-25 tells us that we are no longer under the law of Moses. The law was our guardian, pole says, until Christ came.

But now that Christ is here, we are no longer under that guardian. And so that means the tithes and offerings mentioned here no longer apply to Christians. Under Jesus, there is no fixed percentage of 10%.

If you want to apply the 10%, then to be consistent, you should employ Levites and prepare animal sacrifices as well.

But let me just give you one more reason why it's difficult to say tithing, as popularly understood, still applies to us. You see, even under the Mosaic law, that 10% figure is misleading.

[30 : 40] I mentioned earlier that there was more than one tithe in the Old Testament and it's actually quite hard to add them all up together. But if you did, you would come up with a figure that would be somewhere between 20% and 30% of your income.

The scholars disagree on the exact figure, but I think just about all agree that it isn't 10%. And so to be consistent, you have to give at least 20%, not 10%.

And furthermore, that doesn't even take into account the offerings mentioned in Malachi 3, which is distinct from the tithe. You see, their value is virtually impossible to quantify, because don't forget the offerings here are not monetary, but most probably the grain offering.

And so even if you're giving 10%, you're not getting it right even under the Mosaic Law. And so if the Mosaic Law doesn't apply, does that mean we've just wasted our time studying this passage today?

No. Because number two, God is still interested in what our heart treasures. Remember, this is ultimately the big point of today's passage.

[31 : 58] The big point is not give offering, get blessing. It's not vending machine theology. Put in two ringgit, the coat will come out. Put in tithe, blessing comes out.

No, the big point is God wants us to return to him. God wants our hearts, not just our gifts. And yet, what we give him is often indicative of where our heart is.

What the people in Malachi's day gave God or failed to give God was indicative of where their heart was. As Jesus says, where your treasure lies, there your heart will be also.

And so today, how we use our money will be indicative of where our hearts are. Our patterns of giving will expose what we treasure. And so God wants to know, is Jesus our treasure?

Are our hearts Jesus shaped? And that's why in the New Testament, it's no longer about a certain percentage that we have to meet. The person of Christ, not a strict percentage, is what now directs the orientation of our hearts.

[33 : 17] Christ's love for us, and our love for Christ now directs the flow of our giving. God needs to be given to God, we could so easily move from that to thinking that only 10% of our lives need to be given to God.

But what God is interested in is a heart that has grasped the gospel, that now responds in love and gratitude to him, and that now manifests itself in 100% of a life given to him.

And so that takes us to number three. If our hearts are shaped by Jesus and his grace, it will overflow in the way we give.

Now I know you're asking now, so what does Jesus shape giving look like? The New Testament does give us some pointers, and although obviously we won't have the time to look at it in detail, we will look at 2 Corinthians 8-9, we won't turn there, but let me just give you three principles from that passage.

Firstly, Christians should give according to their means, that's in 2 Corinthians 8-3. God is not asking us to be reckless, and so we don't have to feel guilty if we feel like we're not giving much, because it's genuinely difficult to make ends meet.

[34 : 51] Remember, it's the heart, not the amount that God is interested in. And God is not asking you to abandon caring for yourself or your family. And yet, secondly, Christians should still give generously.

2 Corinthians 8-3-7 gives us the example of the Macedonian Christians, who were willing to be financially stretched, because they genuinely wanted to share with the rest of God's people. They demonstrated their love by the abundance of their giving, even if it meant a little bit of pain for them. Now, what generosity will look like will look different for different people.

For our 6-year-old, 10 ringgit from her piggy bank will be painful but generous. For our investment banker, 100 ringgit from his bank account is stingy and certainly not a sacrifice.

And so here's a good question. Do you feel a little bit of pain? Do you feel the pain of not enjoying that extra cup of latte every month because you've set it aside?

[36 : 05] Then you know that your giving has a sacrificial element to it. And thirdly, Christians are to give cheerfully.

That's in 2 Corinthians 9 verse 7. It shouldn't be impulsive. It shouldn't be casual. But it should be done with the right resolve knowing that this will please God.

It should be done knowing that in one sense it is still true that as we sow, we will reap. But it's not necessarily a material harvest that you will reap.

For as 2 Corinthians 9 verse 10 says, what you will harvest is a harvest of your righteousness. In other words, what you give, God will use to benefit others, to promote his kingdom, and give him the glory.

And that's the harvest we can enjoy. God will sustain you ensuring that you have enough so that you can continue to be God's instrument of blessing to others.

[37 : 14] And who are we to give to? The New Testament does suggest that in the first instance, your first priority is your church family, the full-time workers who serve among you, as well as the needy in your church community.

That's not too different from the Old Testament tithe, is it? Remember, they gave to support the Levites as well as the needy. And then after that, you do have freedom.

Perhaps you might like to consider giving to a missionary or a faithful Christian organisation. And how much? Again, there is no percentage.

We just work with those two principles we just mentioned according to your means, and yet generously. But this is where the 10% figure can still be helpful. It is no longer law for Christians, but it can be a helpful guideline to start with to adjust up or down as you prayerfully consider your financial circumstances.

But as we finish, remember, let our giving come from the overflow of a hard grip by grace and gratitude.

[38 : 27] That's what God is interested in, not the 10%. Some of you may very well be tithing faithfully, but you haven't given your entire life over to God.

Well, if that's you, then God wants you to return to Him. Pray for your hearts to be gripped by Him. Others of you might genuinely want to live for God, but you haven't yet intentionally thought about how that should happen in the area of your giving.

God wants you to return to Him in this area as well. Perhaps sit down one evening, do some planning, so that you can give a little bit more thought in how you want to glorify God in this.

If you need just a little bit more help, I put on your outline a link to a helpful booklet by John Stott called 10 Principles of Christian Giving. But let's make sure we do it.

Return to Him. Well, we all need His help in this area, don't we? I certainly do. So let's now turn to the Lord in prayer.

[39 : 38] Amen.