

THE THIEF

Malachi is a curious little book. In its few brief chapters, God manages to meddle in a whole bunch of issues we'd rather keep private. He takes his people to task for doubting his loving commitment to us. He charges them with offending him by offering him, the Great King of the Universe, damaged goods and leftovers, the sacrificial equivalent of road-kill. He demands that they treat him with deference and respect—no whining about worship.

He refuses to excuse their quickness to give in to peer pressure and demands that they speak his truth kindly, but plainly and faithfully.

God tells his people that it matters who they marry. He calls them to choose partners who share their faith. And he has hard things to say to those who break their covenant vows and promises by divorcing their mates without cause.

God warns about accountability. His patience—his merciful choice to withhold what people deserve—is not forever. A day of reckoning is coming when Jesus, the righteous Judge, will take his seat and all humankind will stand before him to give an account of their lives.

These were tough messages for Israel to hear. They're tough for us. We might never admit it out loud but we can get offended that God dares intrude into our most private affairs.

And if we are not offended yet by God's messages through his prophet, what God says next may well push us over the edge. Turn with me to Malachi 3:6-12.

This is perhaps the best well-known passage about tithing in the Bible. And because it talks about money, specifically how much money is due God, and because money has such power in our lives, these verses have generated more than their share of attention.

Some conclude that this text has nothing to say to us today. They conclude that since we are no longer under law, but under grace, the tithe is no longer binding as a standard for giving. They would teach that Old Testament laws are not applicable on the people of God today.

Some press this line of thinking even further and infer that by teaching Christians to tithe, professional clergy are manipulating religious people in order to perpetuate institutional Christianity. In other words, preachers promote tithing because they want to get into your pockets in order to build and maintain their own little organizations.

In church history, we have examples of *forced* tithing in which the support of the church became a kind of legally imposed tax. For instance, opposite St. Peter's Church in Elmsett, England is the Tithe Memorial, a defiant monument erected by Mr Charles Westren, a farmer, who refused to pay his tithe. The Church of England at that time was entitled to collect its tithes (taxes) from local people, whether or not they were Anglicans, for the upkeep of the church and its vicar. The Church seized household goods and farm commodities to meet his obligation. Farmer Westren put up the stone monument in protest.

Those who teach a prosperity gospel take this passage in a whole other direction. For instance, Gloria Copeland writes: "Are you ready to take the limits off your income? I am! And the Lord has been showing me how we can do it. ...How can we get on that road to increase? I can tell you in two simple words: through tithing. ...Tithing is the covenant transaction that opens the door for God to be directly involved in our increase. It is a two-way exchange in which we honor God by giving him 10 percent of our income and he, in return, provides us with a surplus of prosperity."

In this scheme, tithing becomes a kind of divine investment exchange in which our giving obligates God to make us rich.

Central to our whole understanding of giving here at Bethel is a little verse from the Book of Proverbs: “Honor the LORD with your wealth...” (Prov. 3:9-10). Tithing isn’t about supporting a budget. It’s about honoring God. That is fundamental. Miss this one point and all of our thinking gets skewed.

In the Bible, money is never neutral. How we allocate our money speaks volumes about our loyalties and values. Before we can even begin to ask the “how much” question, we have to settle in our hearts our determination to honor God with the resources he has entrusted to us.

And frankly, this is where most of our problems with giving begin. Many approach the “how much” question with a “how little” attitude. Honoring God isn’t even on the radar. We want to have as much of the good life as we can and give just enough to feel good about supporting the church. So we end up with “tithing lite”—after all, one must be practical.

It never dawns on us that when it comes to honoring God, being impractical can be the most practical thing we can do!

Most people are surprised to learn that the practice of tithing wasn’t something new God came up with just for Israel. Tithing didn’t begin when God gave the law to Moses on Mt. Sinai. Most civilizations from antiquity regularly practiced tithing to their gods including the Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Greeks and Romans. We have records indicating that the ancient Chinese and Indian cultures also paid tithes. It is an ancient practice deeply rooted in the human understanding of one’s obligation to deity.

So tithing was nothing new for Israel. Long before God gave the law, Abraham paid tithes to Melchizedek. Abraham’s grandson, Jacob, promised to tithe as God blessed him. The practice of tithing pre-dated the law. The Mosaic Law enshrined in the religious code of Israel the responsibility to give the tithe—one-tenth of one’s income—to Yahweh. It honored God and provided the means to support the temple worship and services, and the priests and Levites who gave themselves to that ministry.

When they built the temple, they attached storerooms to receive the tithes of God’s people. In an agricultural society, people gave commodities: grain and produce, live animals and manufactured goods.

During Malachi’s time, one of the priests, Eliashib by name, had refurbished a suite of those temple storerooms as an apartment for Tobiah, an Ammonite leader. Nehemiah, a contemporary of Malachi, mentions this Tobiah as one of his chief opponents in the restoration of Jerusalem. Because of Eliashib’s official neglect, the people stopped bringing their tithes. The Levites were forced to return to their homes and farm the land to earn a living. This further eroded worship in Jerusalem.

God used Malachi to speak into this situation and call the people to repentance. Notice how God frames up the dispute—v. 6-8.

God doesn’t change. We call that God’s immutability. God’s character is not subject to whims of passion. In the face of Israel’s disobedience, God remained faithful and loving, merciful and gracious. And in his mercy and grace, he invites Israel to repentance—to return to him?

When they asked, “How?” God answered with a question: “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.” This was serious stuff. God called a person a thief who stole from God by refusing to honor God with a tenth of his or her income.

In the case of Israel, God cursed their blessings. They were experiencing drought and plagues of locusts. That only reinforced the downward spiral. They held back the tithe, so God held back their ability to make wealth. The less they had, the less inclined they were to honor God with the tithe.

God called them to repentance—to rearrange their values and change their minds about tithing. God even invited them to test him—to tithe and measure the results. He promised to open heaven's floodgates and bless them with more than they could handle.

We really like that promise. Jesus updated it during his ministry when he gave this insight into God's economy: "Give, and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together and running over, will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38). This is another instance of the law of spiritual reciprocity: God mirrors back to us our response to him. Solomon put it this way: "One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another withholds unduly, but comes to poverty. A generous man will prosper; he who refreshes others will himself be refreshed" (Prov. 11:24-25).

And here we need to make some observations.

- There is a difference between Israel and the church. God promised Israel physical and material blessings in the land. God promised to bless us—his children in the church—with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ Jesus. This is where the prosperity gospel, the "Word of Faith" movement errs greatly. They apply the old covenant material blessings to us today. We are not Israel and we do not live in the land God promised to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. So there is not a one to one correspondence between our giving and God's material blessing.

However, the Bible does teach that as we are faithful in using what material blessings God has entrusted to us, God will trust us with more—not to consume on our own desires, but to use faithfully to further advance his Kingdom and gospel.

- While there is a difference between Israel under the old covenant and the church under the new covenant, I believe the tithe—ten percent of our income—remains a baseline for understanding what it means to honor God with our wealth.

The tithe didn't begin with the law and I do not believe that it ended with the law. Under the law, the tithe was given to support the temple and its service. In this new age of grace, I believe the tithe should be directed to the local Church of which you are a part. If we wish to support other individuals and ministries, we are free to do so by giving beyond the tithe.

Even if you believe that the tithe is no longer obligatory in the age of grace, the obligation to honor God with your wealth remains. Shall we do less under grace than Israel did under law? Might not the tithe be a place to begin your understanding of how to honor God with our wealth?

- It seems to me that most of the objections I hear about the tithe focus on its burden. People just don't want to give that much. More often than not, they have expanded their lifestyle beyond their capacity to afford it. Carving out ten percent to honor God would put them under, or cramp their style. Our problem is that when it comes to thinking about how much we need, we always compare up, not down. We look at the lifestyles of the rich and famous instead of the lifestyles of the urban or rural poor, so we never quite learn contentment with what God has chosen to supply.

I doubt that there is much we could say to a committed materialist that would change his or her heart. Greed is a powerful idolatry. But greed also distances us from God. When we dishonor God with our wealth by stealing from God to support our lifestyle, we cannot expect God to enjoy much the pleasure of our company. Any more that a boss would enjoy the company of an employee who was stealing from him. If this describes you, God's word to you is the same as his word to Israel: "Return to me, and I will return to you."

Before we can make a change in our giving, we have to make a change in our hearts. Am I willing to honor God with my wealth, and will that determination reach all the way past my lips to my checkbook?

In preaching a message like this, I am sensitive to the reality some of us face due to joblessness. You may have been out of work for some time and hearing a sermon like this may sound like God—or the church—is placing an impossible demand on you. Listen, you can't tithe income you aren't making. Some of you grieve the fact that you are no longer able to give as you once did. That grief honors God even though you have nothing to place in the offering. Even though your checkbook may be empty, your heart is not and God is pleased with your heart. When you once again find work, you will again have the means to give.

For the rest of us, you need to know that our church family is way above average in its commitment to honor God with our wealth. The percentage of people here who tithe regularly is far greater than the national norms. I believe this church, even though we are not a wealthy church, exceeds in the grace of giving. May God bless you for your faithfulness.

On vacation Sundays I like to visit other churches. Last year I visited Trinity Wesleyan to hear my friend Keith Hinton preach. They have a charming custom that I found refreshing. When the pastor invited the ushers to come forward to receive the offering, the congregation stood and cheered. Isn't that amazing? That was so cool! It spoke volumes about their delight in honoring God with their wealth.

As you give, I hope your heart cheers!

Don't rob God so you can get more stuff. Jesus said: "...where your treasure is, there your heart will be also" (Matthew 6:21). Make sure your heart is in the right place, offered with your tithe as a pure sacrifice that honors God.