

Malachi: Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy

Apathy Towards Giving (Malachi 3:6-12)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 16, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This morning's passage presents us with a challenge. **Because if there is a favorite go-to-verse for prosperity preachers, it would be Malachi 3:10.** Here we have God inviting you to put him to the test. To give a full tithe, and then to see if he will not pour down blessing in such abundance that you'll have no need for more.
 - So a prosperity preacher will often point to a passage like this and hold it up as a motivation to give. The more you give; the more God will out give you. You can't out give God. **Prosperity teaching boils down to the idea that God promises to reward your giving with prosperity – typically with financial prosperity.**
 - These teachers will exhort you to “plant a seed” – by which they mean a donation to their church or ministry – and watch that faith seed grow and come back to you in the form of abundance. This kind of giving, they say, taps into God's law of reciprocity. Give to the Lord, and he will out give you.
- ❖ If you've heard this before, that's no surprise since this kind of prosperity teaching – trying to pass for Christianity – is simply in the air we breathe, especially here in Houston. The home base of the largest congregation of the most prominent purveyor of prosperity teaching in the world – is less than five miles north, right up the road from us.
 - **Prosperity teaching is one of Houston's biggest global exports.** There are millions around the world imbibing this kind of teaching through weekly television broadcasts. And that means there are millions around the world – especially in developing nations with so many living below the poverty line – being taught to treat giving as a means of gain. And all the while filling the coffers of American ministries and churches. So, as you can tell, I have nothing but contempt for prosperity teaching.
- ❖ But here's the challenge: **When you read Malachi 3:10, wouldn't you have drawn a similar conclusion?** Doesn't it sound like God is inviting us to test his generosity? I'll read it again, *“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.”*
 - **Now you might be thinking the problem with prosperity teaching is that it fails to interpret this verse within its appropriate OT context.** This invitation to test his generosity was given to the nation of Israel, to those bound by law to give a tithe, and the blessing had more to do with rainfall from heaven than a windfall of cash.
 - Yes, those are good observations and a right application of the principles of biblical interpretation. **But if we keep reading into the NT, a similar principle of reciprocity seems to be reinforced.** Listen to **2 Corinthians 9:6.** In context of preparing the Corinthian church for a monetary collection aimed at alleviating the suffering of the Jerusalem church, Paul says, *“The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.”*

- ❖ **If you sow bountifully – in context that means to bountifully give money to this collection – then you will reap bountifully.** That sounds a lot like God pouring down a blessing until there is no more need. And one could assume that you would reap in like manner as you sowed, meaning what bountifully comes back to you could be in monetary terms. There’s nothing in the text precluding that conclusion.
 - So here’s the challenge: **How do we apply this morning’s text in a faithful manner while avoiding the worldly, materialistic conclusions of prosperity teaching?** I don’t want to water down our passage or to gloss over some remarkable divine promises and universal principles that would still apply to us today – just because I have an aversion towards prosperity teaching and want to avoid sounding like a prosperity preacher.
 - So that’s what I hope to do, by the grace of God. I want to do justice to this text while distinguishing what it teaches from what you’ll hear from a prosperity teacher. With that in mind, we’re going to look at three things related to Christian giving. Let’s talk about (1) the heart of giving, (2) the duty of giving, and (3) the goal of giving.

The Heart of Giving

- ❖ Let’s start by considering the heart of giving – that is, the motivation behind our giving. What should be going on in our hearts when we give. **And right off the bat in our passage, God makes it clear that he’s more concerned with what’s in our hearts when we give than what’s in our hands.**
 - Recall the context of our passage. **In the prior verses, Israel had been complaining of God being unjust – of God treating them unfairly.** They and the generation before them had heeded the call to return from the Babylonian exile. They reoccupied Jerusalem and rebuilt the temple, and yet they still experienced economic stagnation and poverty. Especially compared to their neighbors like the Edomites who seemed to be recovering much faster. But that’s unfair of God to apparently bless them since it was Edom that colluded with the Babylonians when they invaded Israel.
- ❖ **So how does God’s respond to Israel’s complaint? He points to his unchanging character.** He has not mistreated them. He’s never mistreated them because he has never changed. In fact, if anyone has changed or turned aside, it’s the Israelites. Listen to v6, *“⁶For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.”*
 - The LORD says the only reason you haven’t been consumed by my holy wrath – the only reason you haven’t been wiped off the face of the earth – is because I don’t change. I remain the same. In both my character and my commitment to my covenant.
 - **Behind the Israelite’s complaint was the assumption that God has changed.** That he once loved them and set his favor on them. But now he hates them and set his curse on them. But what they don’t recognize is that God is being completely consistent with the covenant he made with Israel.

- ❖ **In Deuteronomy 28, the LORD clearly states that within this covenant are covenantal blessings and covenantal curses.** If Israel obeys the voice of the LORD and is careful to do his commandments, then there will be blessings poured out in terms of fruitful crops, fruitful wombs, and fruitful engagements with neighboring nations. **But if Israel does *not* obey God’s voice and is *not* careful to do his commands, then there will come curses.** And starting in Deuteronomy 28:38, it warns that locusts shall consume your crops, worms shall eat your vineyards, crickets shall possess all your trees and the fruit of your ground.
 - That falls in line with what the LORD warns in Malachi 3:9. You are cursed with a curse. And in v11, he makes reference to “*the devourer*” who destroys the fruits of your soil and the vines of the field. He’s talking about those locusts and worms and crickets that are part of the covenantal curse.

- ❖ So the economic decline in Israel is not a result of God changing his mind on a whim. No, he is following through exactly with what he promised. **He remains resolutely consistent with his covenant.** That’s why our passage says – if you want to experience God’s covenantal blessings, then you’ll have to change. You’re going to have to turn back to the LORD.
 - Keep reading in v7, “*Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.*” **So imagine our unchanging God and his unchanging character to be like a strong and steady breeze, always and forever blowing in one singular direction.** Never moving. Never waning. Imagine, as well, that you’re riding a bike with the wind at your back. It’s propelling you along. Your pedaling is easy and enjoyable. You feel light as a feather. But imagine, for some reason, you turn your bike around, so now you’re riding against the wind. It’s no longer propelling you. It’s resisting you. Your ride has become hard and bitter. You feel like your bike has been cursed.

- ❖ What’s the solution? Expect the wind to change course? **No, you need to turn back around. Stop riding against the wind and ride with it.** You need to return to the right direction. And that’s what v7 calls for. Return to me. The Hebrew word for *return* can also be translated as *repent*. And to repent means to turn around, to change course in a 180° direction.
 - **If Israel repents – if they turn around, if they return to the LORD – then they will discover that the LORD has returned to them.** In the sense that they will suddenly feel his presence propelling them along in obedience, strengthening their legs to follow him, and filling them with joy. But it’s not as if God changed course or as if he suddenly showed up. He was always there, steady and sure. What changes is that sinners like us repent. We return to the LORD.

- ❖ But how are we to repent? **What does repentance look like in this case?** That’s the question posed at the end of v7, “*But you say, ‘How shall we return?’⁸Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.*”
 - So how is Israel to repent? By making a change in their giving. **Based on their present practice of tithing, the LORD accuses them of robbing him.** By not giving a full tithe, they were not giving to God what belongs to God.

- ❖ The idea of robbing God implies that everything – including our goods and resources and our money – belongs to God. In **1 Chronicles 29**, when King David collects all the freewill offerings that the people dedicate to the construction of the temple, he acknowledges to God that all these donations they’re giving him ultimately “*come from you, and of your own have we given you.*” (29:14).
 - Think about what this means. If everything already belongs to him – if God is the ultimate source and owner of all things – then a failure to give our tithes and contributions offends God. Not because it affects his bottom line. Not because it wrecks his perfect plans as if he were depending on our gifts. **No, it offends God because a failure to give reveals an apathetic heart.**

- ❖ In **Matthew 6:21**, Jesus says, “*For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*” **He means where I find you storing your treasure, I’ll also find your heart.** Or in other words, where you direct your treasure (money) corresponds with whatever has captured your heart. You’re only going to spend money or invest money or give money to the things you already love. To whatever has captured your heart.
 - So by withholding their full tithe, the Israelites were demonstrating that God didn’t have their hearts. They had given their hearts to something else. So when they’re called to return, it’s not just to return their stolen tithes to the temple but to return their hardened hearts to the LORD.
 - **The focus of this text is not to measure how much you can give to God – but to view your giving to God as a measure of your devotion.** The principle we can draw from this situation in Malachi’s day and apply in our day is this – **a generous hand of giving reveals a soft heart of repentance.**

- ❖ **Think of your giving pattern as a thermometer and not a thermostat.** Changing your giving pattern is not going to change your relationship with God. It’s not like a thermostat. That’s the fault of prosperity teaching. It treats your giving like a thermostat. The more you give the more you improve your relationship with God and secure his favor.
 - But that’s not how it works. **Giving works more like a thermometer. It measures what’s already there.** Your giving pattern measures your devotion to God. It reveals your relationship with him. It shows a heart of repentance. Like I said, a generous hand of giving reveals a soft heart of repentance.

- ❖ So that raises the all-important question: **When you consider where your money is going – how it’s being spent, how it’s being invested, how it’s being given away – what does all that reveal about the state of your heart in relation to God?** A generous hand of giving to God and his kingdom reveals a soft heart of repentance – a heart that has returned to the LORD. It reveals that you’re riding with him and with his wind.
 - **But a stingy hand towards God reveals a hardened heart of apathy.** And all the troubles you face, could very well be explained by the direction you’re facing. You’re stubbornly riding headlong against the wind. Return to him. Repent in your heart and open up your hands.

The Duty of Giving

- ❖ So we looked at the heart of giving and a principle that applies to us today even though we live and worship God in different contexts compared to ancient Israelites. But now let's talk about the tithe and set it in its proper historical and theological context, and in so doing, I hope it'll help us understand the Christian's duty of giving.

- ❖ So in Malachi's day, the people were failing to give the full tithe. A tithe means a tenth. You give to God a tenth of your crops or income. Now under the Old Covenant, there were **three different types of tithes**. First, there was the **Levitical tithe** where you would give a tenth of your annual produce to support the Levites so that they can be free to minister full-time in the tabernacle or temple (Deut 14:27; Num 18:24). Second, there was the **festival tithe** which required Israelites to travel to Jerusalem to present this offering before the Lord (Deut 14:22-23). And third, there was the **welfare tithe** which was collected every three years for the purpose of supporting needy Levites, foreigners, orphans, and widows (Deut 14:28-29).
 - **Taken together, that results in each family annually giving at least twenty percent of their resources with an extra ten percent every third year.** So we often think the Israelites were only commanded to give ten percent, but in reality they would give far more to God in the course of a year.

- ❖ **Now in our passage, the failure to give a full tithe was affecting the Levites in particular.** We know this to be the case because the book of Nehemiah provides us with historical context. Nehemiah was likely written after Malachi, so some of the reforms that Nehemiah instituted were addressing the problems found here.
 - In **Nehemiah 13:10**, we learn that Levitical tithes were not being given, which resulted in the Levites having to forsake their temple duties, so they could tend to their own fields and provide for themselves. So when v10 speaks of bringing the full tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house, it's referring to the temple storehouses that the Levites would draw from. God's concern for the tithe was a concern for his chosen tribe. That they be amply supplied by their fellow Israelites.

- ❖ So that was the OT context for tithing. It was very much connected with temple worship. But now when we move into the NT and examine what life and worship looked like under the New Covenant – **we don't see a continuation of the tithe as practiced in the OT.** It's only mentioned in three places in the NT. Twice in the Gospels – in reference to the practice of the Pharisees who were still operating under the Old Covenant (Lk 11:42; 18:12). And in the book of Hebrews – in reference to Abraham paying a tithe to the mysterious Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-10). **So in the NT, there is no command or prescription for Christians to practice a tithe like the Israelites did in the context of temple worship.**
 - And that's because Jesus fulfilled the role of all the sacrifices in temple worship and the role of the temple itself. From now on, if you want to come before God in worship, you go – not to a place – but to a person, to Christ. And you don't bring a sin offering, you bring a heart of faith that trusts in the offering that Jesus made, once for all, of his body as a sacrifice for sins.

- ❖ But just because the tithe, as a matter of law and temple worship, has been fulfilled in Christ – **that doesn't mean the act of giving itself, as a form of Christian worship, has been fulfilled.** Giving is still a part of Christian worship. It's still a Christian responsibility. We still have a duty to give. There may not be direct prescriptions to give like in the OT, but if you look in the NT, there certainly are principles for giving. Let me identify three for you.
 - **First, as Christians, our giving should be *planned*.** As opposed to giving impulsively whenever you hear a heart-wrenching story or a guilt-inducing sermon. In **1 Corinthians 16:2**, Paul recommends, on the first day of every week (Sundays), that each of us put something aside and store it up. Plan it out.
 - Why? Because, as it says in **2 Corinthians 9:7**, “*Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.*” God wants cheerful giving and that's usually not the case when we give in reaction to strong appeals. Whatever we give should be something we've prayerfully decided to do in our heart.

- ❖ **Second, our giving should be *proportional*.** That means we ought to give proportionally to our income. 1 Corinthians 16:2 tells the worshipper to set aside an offering “*as he may prosper.*” **That means the more he prospers, the more he should set aside.**
 - That's why there is no set amount that a Christian ought to give. It's going to be different for each of us. Generally, Christians with greater wealth will give more than those with less, but focusing on a percentage of income versus a raw figure is more helpful. How else do we make sense of Jesus saying the widow who dropped two copper coins in the coffer gave more than the rich who dumped in large sums? She gave proportionally more than the rich. She gave a larger percentage of her income.

- ❖ And that leads to our third principle, **our giving should be *plentiful*.** **2 Corinthians 8:3** describes how the Macedonian believers “*gave according to their means . . . and beyond their means, of their own accord.*” They weren't content to simply do their duty. They sought to excel in this act of giving (8:7). They were looking to sow bountifully. To give plentifully.
 - I usually encourage Christians who don't have a practice of regularly giving to God – to start with a tithe. **Start with ten percent of your gross income. But don't be content to end where you started.** Seek ways to excel in the act of giving – to give beyond your means. Challenge yourself every year to give a percentage more.

- ❖ And again, let's be clear, we give – not as a matter of law – but as a matter of grace. If the question you're asking is, “Do I have to give?”, then you've already started in the wrong direction. **The real question is, “Why am I not giving?” or “Why am I not giving more?”**
 - If I have been blessed in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places – if I have this amazing verse in Scripture where God promises to bless me bountifully and pour down a blessing until there is no more need – then why am I *not* giving more? What is holding me back from giving a tenth or from going beyond?

- ❖ **If you're thinking you can't afford it, then this is where you need to hear God's invitation to test him.** It's quite remarkable that God would invite us to test him since most instances of people testing God were rooted in hard heartedness (Deut 6:16; Mt 4:7). But here God wants us to test his unchanging character and commitment to his covenant.
 - **With no other command in Scripture will you read of God inviting us to test him.** Daring us to comply to see how he responds. There is no text that says, "Keep the Sabbath. Give it a try and see if it makes a difference. Test me in this and see if I don't bless you."

- ❖ But when it comes to giving, God says test me. **And it's not presumptuous or blasphemous because the test is really a test of our own faith.** God is challenging us to live a life of faith that trusts in his generous provision. You may think you can't afford to give any more than you've already given, but this is where your faith can be more than words. More than habits. More than a routine. **This is your chance to walk by faith by giving by faith.** Giving to God – not just out of your abundance – but in sacrificial ways that require you to trust his words when he says, "*whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.*"
 - **And trusting God also means trusting him to choose what form these blessings from heaven will arrive.** In Malachi 3, the blessings came in the form of abundant rain. That's what opening "*the windows of heaven*" refers to in v10. And in v11, the LORD removes the covenantal curses and replaces them with the blessings of plentiful crops and fruitful vines.
 - Now in our day and in the particulars of our situation, the blessing that God pours down could be material or monetary in nature. Or it could be spiritual in nature and your financial situation doesn't change. Your financial struggles stay the same. **If that would disappoint you – if his blessings poured down on you from heaven weren't monetary in nature – then it raises the question of whether you're really *trusting* God or *using* God.**

The Goal of Giving

- ❖ And that raises the all-important question of the goal of giving. **Why do we give to God and to his church or to his kingdom work around the world?** If the goal is our gain – if the goal is our prosperity – then God and giving to God has become a means to an end. We're essentially using God to get what we really want, which is not God nor the goals of God.
 - **This is where we need to clearly distinguish what's being taught in our text from what's being taught in the pulpits of prosperity preachers.** They use v10 as a proof text to treat godliness – and giving to God – as means of gain.
 - But what they fail to do is to interpret v10 within the context of v12, where God explains the goal of giving. And it's not focused on us and our financial gain. **It's about the unbelieving world being drawn towards the God of all blessings, and it's about our joy in being used by God as a channel of that blessing.** Listen to v12, "*Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*"

- ❖ Apparently, the goal of our giving has more to do with God and his glory than us and our prosperity. **The goal is for the nations to call us blessed and be drawn to the One who blesses.** Like a city on a hill or a lamp on a stand – the blessing we receive from heaven is intended to shine forth and draw in the lost from out of a dark and evil world.
 - So a failure to give is not just a selfish act. It's an unloving act. **Failure to give to God will hinder a blessing to you that could have blessed others around you.** This is why the real point of Malachi 3 is fundamentally different than what you'll hear in prosperity teaching. Our text has God and the unbelieving world in view – not your health and wealth. The Bible sees prosperity as a means and not the end. But prosperity teaching has it flipped around. They've turned the Bible on its head.

- ❖ Think about it: **What's going to draw the unbelieving world to Christ? It won't be our riches. It'll be our joy.** Notice in v12 the emphasis on being a land of delight. Joy is a far more compelling witness than riches. Joy in poverty is far more attractive than joy when you're rich. Everyone assumes the latter. But everyone is blown away by the former.
 - **Here's the takeaway: When you give generously to God and to the work of God through his church, you should expect, by faith, to receive a reciprocal blessing.** And that blessing, if the Lord wills, could very well be material or monetary in nature. But you know that money can't buy you happiness. Some of the richest people in the world are, at the same time, the most miserable.
 - **So in the end, the goal is for you to find your joy and delight in the God of all blessings and to make him look great in the eyes of the unbelieving world.** That is why you should give to the LORD. That's not what you'll find in prosperity teaching, but it is what you'll find in the Bible.