

## **What's In Your Wallet?**

Malachi 3; 2 Corinthians 9:6-8

### **Introduction**

The title grabbed my attention: "Our Church Was Robbed Recently." The story that followed said:

"We are thankful that no one was injured physically, but it will be some time before things are back to normal. It's clear that more than one person is responsible - in fact, there may actually be many people who have been party to the crime. Two things are most unfortunate about the robbery - one is that we have no assurances that it will not happen again, and that is a bit unnerving! The other unfortunate element is that we are certain that those who carried out the robbery are members of our church. It is bad enough to know that a theft has occurred, but it is really hard to imagine that professing Christians would actually steal from God and the ministries of his church. We can certainly hope that anyone who has participated in this act will repent and repay what has been taken. It is reported that some of the stolen money has been used for vacations, cars, boats, designer clothes, athletic equipment, homes, and even dining out. We do not have a complete list of all the suspects, but there is consolation in knowing that God does.

"You haven't read about this in the papers and hopefully you won't. I realize that some of you will disagree, but it would be difficult to get a conviction in the courts given the clever way in which the robbery was carried out. You are also interested in how much was taken. The amount is undetermined, but at the very least exceeds many thousands of dollars.

"By the way, the robbery happened in full view of the church during Sunday services. It happened as the offering plates were passed during Sunday school and worship. It also happened as people who didn't come simply didn't give the Lord's tithe."

The people in Malachi's day had treated God badly by robbing from him. They had become bored with God. Their worship had turned from relational to ritual. As a result, they offered blemished sacrifices (1:6-14); the priests had become unfaithful (2:1-9); divorce was commonplace and easy (2:10-17); their words wearied God (2:17); businessmen were defrauding their workers, cheating their customers, and taking advantage of widows, orphans, and aliens (3:1-5).

But the most egregious treatment of God was that they were robbing God (3:6-12). How? By withholding their tithes, by giving the worst instead of the best, by giving the least and not the most. Their attitude was, "How little can I give and still keep God happy?"

The people proclaimed their innocence, but Malachi, like a prosecuting attorney, presented the evidence to back up the indictment.

Five statements stand out to me in this passage.

## 1. The tithe is the minimum

"Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me!" You ask: 'How do we rob You?' 'By not making the payments of the tenth and the contributions'" (Mal. 3:8). The tithe comes from a Hebrew word that means one tenth. If you make \$100 today, a tithe would be \$10. It is simple math.

It gets more complicated because in the Old Testament Law there were three tithes. The one to which Malachi referred was for the priests. A second tithe helped celebrate the annual sacred feast. The people used these funds to throw a party in honor of God. And then every third year the people would give another ten percent to help the poor. When you add that together, that equals about 23 percent of a household's income.

Tithing has always been the floor, not the ceiling, of giving to God's work. In other words, tithing is the place to begin, not the place to end in supporting God's kingdom business.

**Larry Burkett said, "As best as I can tell, God never asked less than ten percent from anyone. But if that bothers someone, I can see no reason why they couldn't give twice as much if they desired." (How to Manage Your Money, 9/15/90, p. 3)**

Unfortunately, today the term tithing is often erroneously used for all giving. People talk about "tithing" fifty dollars, when they make \$2000 a month (a tithe of which is two hundred dollars, not fifty). If you give 2 percent or 4 percent of your income, that is a donation but not a tithe.

The tithe was recognized as God's. We should always refer to it as God's tithe not my tithe. People in the Old Testament did not give a tithe but repaid it to the Owner of all things. Rarely does the Bible speak of giving a tithe, but of "taking," "presenting," or even "paying" tithes. No one ever said, "I feel led to tithe." The tithe was explicit and objective. It required no heart response. It was expected. Period. Offerings, on the other hand, (we can use the possession pronoun of "my" in reference to them since they are voluntary) were given from the heart when touched by God's grace.

## 2. The curse came from disobedience (v. 9)

"You are suffering under a curse, yet you - the whole nation - are still robbing Me" (Mal. 3:9). The Old Testament was written to the nation of Israel. God was addressing the nation. Because God's people robbed Him, they have put a curse on the whole nation. They did that to themselves.

In the play, "The Will," by James Barrie, a newlywed couple visits an attorney to make a will. The groom had just inherited some money. He insisted, lovingly, that it all go to her. The wife protests: "No, let's include your cousins and that convalescent home that was so nice to your mother." And so they did. As they were leaving, the lawyer said to them, "You are unusual people, so giving. Please don't change."

Twenty years later, they come to make another will. The estate is now sizable. They hassle about leaving the cousins in the will and cut the convalescent home out. Each of them talks about the

money as "my money, my estate." Then, twenty years later, the man comes alone. His wife is dead. His children have become spoiled. He cannot think of anyone to leave his money to. He says, "I don't want my family to have it. Here is a list of six men that I fought and beat to get my money. Give it to them and let them have the curse of it."

Remember, partial obedience is no obedience. No one benefits from a tithe he or she holds on to.

But we must make one thing very clear: While there are spiritual and financial consequences for failing to give to God, we should never make the mistake of thinking that we will be "cursed" if we have not tithed. "Christ has redeemed us from the curse of the law by becoming a curse for us, because it is written: Everyone who is hung on a tree is cursed" (Gal. 3:13 HCSB). We rest in the new covenant Christ initiated in His blood. He freed us from the curse of keeping the law. And it is because of what He did for us that we should willingly and gladly obey.

### **3. The storehouse represents God's work (v. 10)**

"Bring the full tenth into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house" (Mal. 3:10). In Israel, the people brought their tithes of grain, olives, wine, and meat to be store in the Temple. These goods supported the priests and Levites, those serving God vocationally, since they did not have other jobs. The goods also met the needs of the poor in the community. And, thirdly, these goods met the expenses of the Temple operations.

Giving has always been God's way of financing his church. God never intended for the church to be funded by bingo and raffles. He expected his people to return to support the church with part of their income.

Let me take a slight detour here. The purpose of the tithe is to support God's work, but the primary purpose for the tithe is to put God first in our lives. The tithe was not a legalistic regulation. It was more than the Old Testament income tax. God had a special purpose in asking for the tenth. It was to teach his people to put him first. **"Each year you are to set aside a tenth of all the produce grown in your fields . . . so that you will always learn to fear the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 14:22-23).**

When we put God first in our giving, He will be first in every area of life. This simple truth is the heart of giving. We pay God first. Too many reverse this process. If there is anything left, they give some to God. This is what was happening in Malachi's day. They were giving God the leftovers and, as a result, robbing God.

### **4. The test challenges God to bless (v. 10)**

"Test Me in this way," says the LORD of Hosts" (Mal. 3:10). God challenged His people to give according to the Law so that He could bless them. Do you realize that this is the only time in Bible where God puts out that kind of challenge? Too often we get hung up on the amount and miss the promise.

It is amazing to me that people who trust God for their salvation, their eternity in heaven, will not trust God with their finances. What is the logic in that? If we can trust God for our eternal destiny, don't you think we can trust God with our careers, our finances, and our giving?

### **5. The blessings come from Heaven by the Lord, Himself. (v. 10)**

"See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure" (Mal. 3:10). This is an amazing passage of Scripture.

In a giving match, the fact remains that you and I cannot out-give God.

R. G. LeTourneau invented earthmoving machines. He gave away 90 percent of his income. But the money came in faster than he could give it away. LeTourneau said, "I shovel it out and God shovels it back - but God has a bigger shovel."

A young boy went to the store with his mother. The shop owner, a kindly man, passed him a large jar of suckers and invited him to help himself to a handful. Uncharacteristically, the boy held back. So, the shop owner pulled out a handful for him.

When outside, the boy's mother asked why he had suddenly been so shy and would not take a handful of suckers when offered.

The boy replied, "Because his hand is much bigger than mine!"

### **Conclusion**

God's hand is bigger. His shovel is bigger. His wallet is bigger. His generosity is bigger. His love is bigger. Make a game of it. See if you can out-give God. That is the one game you hope you lose, and, in time, you will realize that you will always lose.

In the end, when we rob from God, we are robbing from ourselves. We are robbing ourselves of spiritual blessings, of God's provisions, of a church that can meet the needs of others.

We are left with a choice: How will we treat God? Will we rob God by not giving our tithes, or will be faithful in giving to God what is His?

### **Other Biblical Reasons to Tithe**

- **Tithing Honors an Old Testament Principle**
- **Tithing Honor God, our Creator, as Owner of All Things**
- **Tithing is an Antidote to Greed and Covetousness**
- **Tithing Help Govern Ever Expanding Spending**
- **Tithing is One of God's Ways to Bring About Good Works**
- **Tithing Ensures God's Provision for You**
- **Tithing Proves Our Love for God and Strengthens Our Faith.**

## Illustration: John Wesley

Take John Wesley for example. He was one of the great evangelists of the 18th Century, born in 1703. In 1731 he began to limit his expenses so that he would have more money to give to the poor. In the first year his income was 30 pounds and he found he could live on 28 and so gave away two. In the second year his income doubled but he held his expenses even, and so he had 32 pounds to give away (a comfortable year's income). In the third year his income jumped to 90 pounds, and he gave away 62 pounds. In his long-life Wesley's income advanced to as high as 1,400 pounds in a year. But he rarely let his expenses rise above 30 pounds. He said that he seldom had more than 100 pounds in his possession at a time.

This so baffled the English Tax Commissioners that they investigated him in 1776 insisting that for a man of his income he must have silver dishes that he was not paying excise tax on. He wrote to them, "I have two silver spoons in London and two in Bristol. This is all the plate I have at present, and I shall not buy any more while so many round me want bread."

When he died in 1791 at the age of 87, the only money mentioned in his will was the coins to be found in his pockets and dresser. Most of the 30,000 pounds he had earned in his life had been given away. He wrote, I cannot help leaving my books behind me whenever God calls me hence; but in every other respect, my own hands will be my executors.

In other words, I will put a control on my spending myself, and I will go beyond the tithe for the sake of Christ and his kingdom. (Quotes from *Mission Frontiers*, Sept./Oct. 1994, nos. 9–10, pp. 23–24.)