

Malachi: Giving Back to God

Malachi 3:7-12

Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on February 25, 2024.

Tough Few Weeks

At a previous church, I had a three-week series on giving back to God – on tithing. We considered the Scripture in both the Old and New Testaments. We talked about giving back to the Lord, about the generosity of God, and trusting him by giving of our resources. The sermons were packed with Scripture and Malachi 3 played a part.

And those three weeks were the worst weeks of giving in my entire tenure at that church. Oh man, this Arkansas hillbillies did NOT want me to tell them in any way, shape, or form what to think about their money or how to spend it.

So, it is with mild trepidation this morning that we continue our series in Malachi by considering what Malachi says in chapter 3 about the tithe. I invite you there with me now. (read text)

Concerning the Tithe

As we consider more deeply this passage, especially concerning the idea of the tithe, we will find the Scripture to be the most effective interpreter of Scripture. So, before we get into Malachi, let's first look to the New Testament and ask and try to answer a simple question about bringing the tithe to the storehouse.

Let's consider the Apostle Paul. He wanted to motivate believers to financially support the cause of Christ. However, he never used the command to tithe in his attempts. Why didn't he? Let's consider a few reasons.

First of all, it is not because Jesus abolished the tithe. Nowhere in Jesus's recorded teachings in the four gospels does the Lord ever teach not to bring the tithe. In Luke 11:42 he says, "But woe to you Pharisees! You give a tenth of mint, rue, and every kind of herb, and you bypass justice and love for God. These things you should have done without neglecting the others." Jesus did not do away with the tithe.

Jesus did teach not to use tithing as justification or as a cover over horizontal injustice between others or vertical lovelessness toward God. Jesus said that you are to do those things, love God and extend His justice towards others, without it ever affecting your giving of the tithe. Jesus did not condemn the tithe or dismiss it or do away with it. He compelled people to tithe; however he pointed out that tithing was not the most important aspect of giving for a Christian. Give love. Give justice. And then give the tithe. But don't give the tithe in place of loving God and extending justice.

We also must consider that Paul agrees with the concept of what the tithe actually was, giving proportionately. Proportionate giving is appropriate in both the Old and New Testaments. 1 Corinthians 16:2 says, "On the first day of the week, each of you is to set something aside and save in keeping with how he is prospering, so that no collections will need to be made when I come."

Here Paul teaches to give proportionately. If you are extremely prosperous financially, set aside more to give to God. If things are not as prosperous, set less aside than before. There is no contradiction between tithing and giving proportionately. A tithe is literally ten percent, or a particular proportion. Paul teaches that consistency between a tithe and giving proportionately.

And remember, it isn't as if ministry needs became less expensive in the New Testament. Paul doesn't ever teach, "Give less because we have less need." On the contrary, Paul acknowledges that the financial burdens are greater in this New Testament context and moving forward.

Let's consider some of the specifics that Paul mentions in the New Testament. In Galatians 6:6 he writes, "Let the one who is taught the word share all his good things with the teacher." In 1 Timothy 5:18, in talking about the payment of vocational, full-time preachers and teachers should receive, he writes, "For the Scripture says: 'Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,' and, 'The worker is worthy of his wages.'" Paul believes that the church should give to the preaching and teaching of the Word.

Paul further expects that the poor in the church ought to be sustained by the financial resources of the people in the church. He shows that very clearly for elderly widows in 1 Timothy 5.

He also shows that in regard to the poorer saints in Jerusalem in Romans 15. Paul believes that the church should give to the caring of the poor within the church.

And Paul also teaches that the evangelistic work of the church through missions is to also be supported by the giving of the people of God. He makes this plain in asking the church in Rome to help support his mission to Spain. And in 1 Corinthians 9:7 he teaches, “Who serves as a soldier at his own expense?” Paul teaches that Christians should give generously and proportionately to support preaching, teaching, caring and missions. All of those things cost money, and that money is to be provided by the believers within the church. Most likely, that cost was greater than in the Old Testament because the mission to unreached people was much more of priority in the New Testament.

So, you’re saying, okay Pastor. We understand, but what unreached people are there in Berkeley County in 2024. I am glad you asked. Do you know what the fastest growing and most difficult unchurched people group is in the United States? The children of those people who are categorized as “de-churched.” Someone who is “de-churched” has chosen, for whatever reason, to no longer attend church.

The “de-churched” numbers are staggering. Since 2000, 40 million American adults have left churches.¹ Those 40 million adults are considered the “de-churched.” Their children are considered “unchurched” and “unreached.” Do you know what that means? It means our adult children who left the church are raising a generation of unreached people. It means that children whose parents do not attend church are unreached for the gospel. That sobering fact alone ought to mean there is a line at the clipboard to sign up to help us share the gospel at the Glow in the Dark Easter Egg Hunt on March 8th at Ridge Road at 6PM.

The New Testament Church has been resourcing evangelistic efforts since Paul’s Damascus Road conversion. Paul has compelled believers to give proportionately to what God has given them to support the preaching, teaching, caring and mission of the church.

¹ This is from research utilized by Drs. Ryan Burge and Paul Djupe with the Data for Political Research.

Jesus never cancelled the tithe. He never replaced it. Proportionate giving has always been in place within the church. The need is certainly not smaller now. In fact, the need is growing with grave urgency.

Why Didn't Paul Commend the Tithe?

So, why didn't Paul follow up on Malachi's exhortation to the tithe? A few reasons stand out in Scripture. One, Paul didn't command the tithe he emphasized willingness over rules or guidelines. In 2 Corinthians 9:7, Paul wrote, "Each person should do as he has decided in his heart – not reluctantly or out of compulsion, since God loves a cheerful giver."

Paul touches on this principle of cheerful giving (being motivated from within to want to give and to give joyfully) also in Philemon. It is a short, one chapter book written by Paul to a wealthy man whose slave was converted to Christianity and Paul asks the wealthy man to send the slave back to Paul as a free man – a generous gift back to the Apostle.

In 2 Corinthians 8, Paul stirs the Corinthian church to give as generously as the Macedonian church. He compels them not in a command but instead he implores them to want to give out of genuine love.

Paul never emphasizes the command of the tithe – give or else. Instead, he wants people to determine in their own hearts what to give out of love for the Lord and for his work and for other Christians. Paul wanted Christians to experience, willingly, the freedom, authenticity, and joy that comes in giving back to the Lord.

Also, Paul didn't command the tithe because that command could be restricting. Someone may wish to give above and beyond that amount. In 2 Corinthians 8:3 he writes of the poverty-ridden Macedonian church who were an example to other churches in sacrificial giving. Paul said, "They gave according to their means" – proportionate giving – "as I can testify, and beyond their means of their own accord, begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints."

Paul de-emphasizes commanding them to give, not to limit their giving but to instead allow them the freedom to give beyond a strict proportion. He wants to encourage believers to give like the Macedonians did.

Acceptable Minimums?

Often, when people ask about how much they should give, they begin to ask about things like giving from net or gross. A lot of Christians are trying to find some acceptable minimum of what to give. In 2 Corinthians 9:6, Paul writes, “The person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously.”

Paul isn't training people to pay some acceptable minimum. Paul teaches that people should consider the maximum freedom in their giving and in many instances, the tithe is too narrow to match God's grace. The tithe can, for some, be too limiting. The tithe sets a baseline, a minimum. Paul wasn't looking for the bare minimum so Christians could feel comfortable.

The idea for Paul is that all that we earn and all that we get should be designed for giving back. In Ephesians 4:28 (a text reminiscent of Malachi 3) Paul wrote, “Let the thief no longer steal. Instead, he is to do honest work with his own hands, so that he has something to share with anyone in need.”

A Christians is not supposed to get something just so they can have whatever it was they wanted. Paul taught that we might get something in order to give. These are two totally different approaches to life. Many Christians think that the only sin relating to money is to steal it. But that is not what the Scripture teaches is the main money-related sin. That is working to have instead of working to give. Ministry takes place when divine resources meet human needs through loving channels for the glory of God. When we work to get, we are not loving channels. We are dead end cul-de-sacs.

Paul wanted to motivate Christians to give out of willingness and not rules. He taught freedom and giving generously over limiting and minimums. And Paul taught that all of life, all of the earning and getting and working and spending that we do should be to help us build a platform from which we can give, love, serve, and pour ourselves out. In that regard, tithing was not the most helpful principle. Generous, proportionate, joyful giving was.

Back to Malachi

So, what does all of that Paul and New Testament stuff have to do with Malachi 3 and a text about the tithe?

After all, Malachi 3:8 says that not tithing is robbing God. Malachi 3:10 is even more explicit. There is the command: Bring all the full tithes into the storehouse.

How does the New Testament help us interpret Malachi 3? Are we supposed to set the money aside or do we keep it? Is there some way the New Testament teaches us to set money aside for the tithe and is there a wrong way to do that?

Scripture points to a few guidelines on how to set aside. These are tricky areas because money is a hot-button issue for people. Some people want to ignore the command to bring tithes to the storehouse because it smacks of legalism, and they don't want to be a slave to some rule. Besides, doesn't the Bible teach freedom and willingness? Should I give even if I don't feel like it?

When we consider tithing, we can fall into two different sins. The sin of self-righteousness and the sin of self-indulgence. Self-righteousness means allowing the tithe to become a feather in the spiritual cap, a chance for someone to brag about their piety. Like Jesus accused the Pharisees of doing when they carefully counted their tithing of herbs.

However, for many people who do not have that issue, they are not off the hook. Because self-indulgence takes over. This is the person who is the opposite of legalistic. In fact, they justify not giving and gladly justify all of their purchases and worldly pleasures.

Self-indulgence also raises its head when the Christians finds other external justification for not giving. Scripture wants to stir up our holy affections. Malachi is a stirring, moving, emotional section here. The prophet teaches us not to ignore the command to tithe because it can awake a deeper freedom within our hearts from the love of money. Bringing our tithe into the storehouse helps to turn our hearts away from money and back to God.

Let the tithe push you into greater freedom in giving proportionately. Stop robbing from God and stop limiting God in your giving. Some people ignore the tithe as outdated or not what the New Testament teaches as a way to make them feel better about not giving. Proportionate giving helps to break those chains that bind us to the love of money.

God is Generous

There is mercy here in Malachi 3. Tithing isn't a burden. It is a mercy. Remember, Malachi is talking to people here who question whether or not God even loves them. He is talking to people who despise God's name. He is talking to people who brought God broken, mangy, blind, lesser-than animals for sacrifice because they loved the profits that they made off of their healthy animals more than they loved God. He is talking to people who teach what is false. He is talking to people who break their covenants and oppress the servant and workers.

This is mindset of the person who doesn't want to give back to God. They doubt his love. They despise His authority and name. They settle for empty, cheap worship and half-hearted, mediocre faith. They love money more than God.

And how does God talk to them? If this is you this morning, if giving back to God is not on your radar, for whatever reason, if proportionate giving is just not something you want to consider, listen carefully.

God says test me. Try me. Prove me. That is remarkable! All throughout Scripture, God compels people NOT to put the Lord to the test. And yet, here, in this specific area, concerning the tithe, God says, "Test me IN THIS. I will open heaven for you. I will stop the destruction of your resources. I will extend your resources. Test me and see for yourself." Does that sound like some harsh, judge?

God is pleading with you this morning to let him bless you and bring you joy. Are you listening? This isn't about some prosperity gospel. This is about a bountiful God's outstretched hands asking a money-loving people to allow Him the chance to bless them with heaven and freedom from that curse of greed.

God is pleading with you to trust him and see his faithfulness and his power and his provision this morning. Will you test him, try him, in this area?