



# Does It Pay to Obey God?

Malachi 3:6-12

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## INTRODUCTION:

Malachi ministered in the fifth-century B.C., about 100 years after Cyrus had issued the decree in 538 B.C. which permitted Jews to return from exile to Judah. In response to the prophetic ministries of Haggai and Zechariah, the repatriated Jews had rebuilt the temple, completing it in 515 B.C. Houses had been reconstructed. Most likely in Malachi's day, the wall of Jerusalem was being rebuilt or had been completed (by Nehemiah's crew).

Life was not easy. It is not easy to many listening today. But do easy conditions make it easier to trust God?

All of us have thought it, perhaps some have said it. At the close of the Old Testament era, the people gathered around Malachi not only *thought* it, but they did also say it; does it pay to obey the Lord?

I doubt if there is anyone listening who hasn't been tempted to ask this question as they faced the challenges of life. In our text, we find God's answer concerning how we can and must trust Him when our expectations differ from reality.

## HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Come to the scene in ancient Israel. The expectations were one thing; the reality was another.

- They expected a *fruitful land*; in reality, all they saw was *drought*.
- They expected a *large population*; in reality, they were a *small one*.
- They expected to be a *powerful, influential nation*; in reality, they were a *weak, fledging nation*.
- They expected to be a *leader among all the nations*; in reality, they were under *the control of a pagan nation*.

The Jews were under the political dominion of Persia. Harvests were poor and subject to locust damage (*Mal. 3:17*). Most hearts were indifferent or resentful toward God. Both the priests and the people were violating the stipulations of the Mosaic Law regarding sacrifices, tithes, and offerings. The people's hope in God's

covenant promises had dimmed, as evidenced by their (a) intermarriages with pagans, (b) divorces, and (c) general moral ambivalence.

Malachi—whose name means “My Messenger”—addressed six spiritual and moral issues that plagued the people of Israel and they are the same issues that we face in our day. These issues were and are:

1. Doubting God’s love (*Mal.1:1-5*)
2. Dishonoring God’s name (*Mal.1:6-2:9*) (they did this by offering blemished sacrifices and half-hearted worship.)
3. Profaning God’s covenant (*Mal.2:10-16*) (they did this by marrying heathen women/divorcing their Jewish wives.)
4. Trying God’s patience (*Mal.2:17*)
5. Forsaking God’s ordinances (*Mal.3:6-12*)
6. Despising God’s service (*Mal.3:13-4:6*)

You can take your pick at any one of these issues and bring it to bear on your life. But for the purpose of this series, I want to zero in on one found in our text. The direction of the book is set up around six questions:

- Chapter 1:2—“*How have You loved us?*”—Questioning of God’s love (*1:1-5*)
- Chapter 1:6—“*How have we despised Your name?*”—Questioning of God’s greatness (*1:6-2:9*)
- Chapter 2:14—“*For what reason*” (*why doesn’t God accept our sacrifices?*)—Questioning of God’s righteousness (*2:10-16*)
- Chapter 2:17—“*How have we wearied Him?*”—Questioning of God’s justice (*2:17-3:6*)
- Chapter 3:7-8—“*How shall we return?*”—Questioning of God’s forgiveness (*3:7-12*)
- Chapter 3:13—“*What have we spoken against You?*”—Questioning of God’s faithfulness (*3:13-4:6*)

## IMMEDIATE CONTEXT

The context of these verses about giving is the faithfulness of God. In chapter 2:17, the backslidden apostate nation of Israel questioned the justice of God.

In chapter 3:1-6, the prophet answers them by urging them to “pay attention” (“Behold”), because three things are about to happen:

1. God’s justice will come. (*Mal.3:1-4*)
2. God’s justice is impartial. (*Mal.3:5*)
3. God’s justice is tempered with grace. (*Mal.3:6*)

- <sup>6</sup>“For I, the LORD, do not change; therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed.”

God’s faithfulness is the outflow of His immutability. It is the outworking of His personal perfections. In every segment of our society, unfaithfulness is the dark stain that appears on every life.

“In the business world, a man’s word is...no longer his bond. In the social world, marital infidelity abounds on every hand. In the ecclesiastical realm, thousands who have solemnly covenanted to preach the truth...now attack and deny it. And no one can claim complete immunity for this fearful sin: in how many ways have we been unfaithful to

Christ, and the light and privileges entrusted to us!...how refreshing, then, how unspeakably blessed, to lift our eyes above this scene of ruin, and behold One who is faithful, faithful in all things, faithful at all times.”<sup>1</sup>

- **Deuteronomy 7:9**—Know therefore that the LORD your God, He is God, the faithful God, who keeps His covenant and His lovingkindness to a thousandth generation with those who love Him and keep His commandments;
- **Numbers 23:19**—God is not a man, that He should lie,  
Nor a son of man, that He should repent;  
Has He said, and will He not do it?  
Or has He spoken, and will He not make it good?

How great is God’s faithfulness?

- **Psalm 36:5**—Your lovingkindness, O LORD, extends to the heavens.  
Your faithfulness reaches to the skies.

How wide are the skies? They are as great as God is! If God could be said to wear clothes, faithfulness would be like a garment of His perfections. He is, as it were, clothed with it.

- **Psalm 89:8**—O LORD God of hosts, who is like You, O mighty LORD?  
Your faithfulness also surrounds You.
- **James 1:17**—Every good thing given and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shifting shadow.

With God’s faithfulness in mind, let’s open of this text by considering...

## OUTLINE:

### A. God’s indictment (v.7a)

- <sup>7</sup>“From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept *them*.”

God’s indictments of our sin in Scripture are not like man’s indictment of crime in our justice system. There is no circumstantial evidence. It’s all clear facts. God’s indictments are *perfect, sure, right, pure, clean, and true* (Ps.19:7-9). They are commanding (that is, they are instructional about *how holy God is and how sinful we are*), but they also provide a divine solution to our problem. Man’s indictments may or may not convict, and they have no power to convert.

Here God’s indictment begins with an indictment of *an unchanged nature*. Israel was disobeying God just as their forefathers had done. Malachi was not enamored with their past privileges or the public professions of faith as a nation. Alluding to the aftermath of Israel’s exodus from Egypt, Malachi says, “you are continuing to do what that first generation of Hebrews who were liberated from bondage did,” and that is, they *failed to trust God*.

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<sup>1</sup> A.W. Pink, *The Attributes of God*, p.52

Why is this always the case? Why do men, regardless of privilege or position or pedigree, always fail to trust in, rely upon, and lean into God and His Word?

1. Because our natural spiritual condition is sinful.

- **Jeremiah 13:23**—Can the Ethiopian change his skin  
Or the leopard his spots?  
*Then* you also can do good  
Who are accustomed to doing evil.
- **Isaiah 1:5**— Where will you be stricken again,  
As you continue in *your* rebellion?  
The whole head is sick  
And the whole heart is faint.

2. Because prosperity does not change who we are.

- **Deuteronomy 31:20**— For when I bring them into the land flowing with milk and honey, which I swore to their fathers, and they have eaten and are satisfied and become prosperous, then they will turn to other gods and serve them, and spurn Me and break My covenant.

3. Because time does not change who we are.

- **Ezra 9:7**—Since the days of our fathers to this day *we have been* in great guilt, and on account of our iniquities we, our kings *and* our priests have been given into the hand of the kings of the lands, to the sword, to captivity and to plunder and to open shame, as *it is* this day.
- **Nehemiah 9:16-17**—But they, our fathers, acted arrogantly;  
They became stubborn and would not listen to Your commandments.  
<sup>17</sup> "They refused to listen,  
And did not remember Your wondrous deeds which You had performed among them;  
So they became stubborn and appointed a leader to return to their slavery <sup>in</sup> Egypt.  
But You are a God of forgiveness,  
Gracious and compassionate,  
Slow to anger and abounding in lovingkindness;  
And You did not forsake them.
- **Acts 7:51-52**—You men who are stiff-necked and uncircumcised in heart and ears are always resisting the Holy Spirit; you are doing just as your fathers did. <sup>52</sup> Which one of the prophets did your fathers not persecute? They killed those who had previously announced the coming of the Righteous One, whose betrayers and murderers you have now become;

Although they were disobeying as they forefathers had done, *the unchanging nature of God* would not allow Him to destroy them. He had committed Himself to Israel, and He must keep His promise. God's unchanging nature guaranteed that He would return to them if they would return to Him again. The reason why Israel is so important in the Scriptures, according to the Apostle Paul, is because how God dealt with them, He will deal with us (*1 Cor.10:11*).

## B. God's invitation (v.7b)

- Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the LORD of hosts.

Whenever you see the word "return" in the Scriptures, you ought to just pause and have a "Selah" moment. What an invitation from a holy God! Notice, God's invitation begins with...

1. A command to repent  
*"Return to Me..."*

The call to "**return**" implies that one has gone astray and needs to turn back. The imperative form of the verb conveys *a sense of urgency* and places a demand for an immediate response.

This is always the tone of a call to repentance. It is never a *passive, laid back, when-you-get-around-to-it*, kind of thing. It is a call to *a complete change of direction* back to God now! A toward reorientation today.

Israel had turned away, not from "*believing in God*," but from "*trusting in God*." They didn't become atheistic or polytheistic in their doctrine, but their *unbelief was demonstrated in their actions*. Such is always the case with us. Our actions are always a reflection of our attitude and mindset.

This is why the prophets, as well as John—the last of the Old Testament prophets and forerunner of our Lord—called for "*fruits in keeping with repentance*" (Cf. *Matt.3:1-9*). If you combine what John says in Matthew 3 with its parallel passage in Luke 3:1-20, John laid out specific applications or exhortations to his audience. These are clear, discernable evidences of repentance in one's life. Six signs of repentance can be traced:

- Repentance is proven by your *compassion*. (*Luke 3:11*)
- Repentance is proven by your *honest business dealings*. (*Luke 3:12-13*)
- Repentance is proven by your *fair treatment of others and contentment*. (*Luke 3:14*)
- Repentance is proven by your *change of lifestyle*. (*Matt.3:7-8*)
- Repentance is proven by your *rejection of false hope*. (*Matt.3:9*)
- Repentance is proven by your *urgency to bring forth fruit*. (*Matt.3:10*)

One of the great misnomers about the prophets in the Old Testament is that they were always messengers of doom. But when you read what they said, you hear the voice of God calling sinners to "turn around..." Why? Because God does not delight in the death of anyone who dies. "*Do I have any pleasure in the death of the wicked,*" declares the Lord God, "*rather than that he should turn from his ways and live?*" (*Ezek.18:23, 32*).

God offers a new beginning and clean slate—namely, the forgiveness of sins and a bright future and life that is more satisfying than the life of sin and rebellion. However, that new beginning starts with a recognition that one has gone far away from God. It begins with a conviction of sin. A conviction that He is not pleased with the disobedience in our lives.

2. A promise of reconciliation  
“...and I will return to you,” says the Lord of hosts.”

You’ve heard it said, ‘If God seems far off, guess who left?’ That’s right...its always us. God had never left them, but they left Him. So His promise of return is a promise of return in favor, blessing, and covenant relationship (Cf. *Zech.1:2-6*).

Matthew Henry says,

God calls them to “return unto Me, and to your service, return to your allegiance, return as a traveler that had missed his way, as a soldier that has run his colors, as a treacherous wife that has gone away from her husband; return, thou backsliding Israel, return to Me; and then I will return unto you and be reconciled, will remove the judgments you are under, and prevent those you fear.

Will you answer as some did in Jeremiah’s day (*Jer.3:22*)?

We are dealing with the same unchanging God who requires obedience and who forgives those who repent of disobedience (*1 John 1:9*). In a world of flux and change, He is the one constant.

### C. Israel’s question (v.7c)

- “But you say, ‘How shall we return?’

Now this question was not a sincere question for *guidance*. Far from it! It was a sarcastic statement of *rebellion*. It was an answer of hypocritical self-justification. They were pretending to be ignorant of any shortcomings that required repentance! They were essentially saying, “Concerning what sin should we return?” In other words, “We have not done anything!”

**Applied:** There are three great hindrances to true fellowship with God and the real assurance that comes from being rightly related to Him.

1. A failure to recognize the sinfulness of sin
  - **1 John 1:6-7**—If we say that we have fellowship with Him and yet walk in the darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth;<sup>7</sup> but if we walk in the Light as He Himself is in the Light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus His Son cleanses us from all sin.
2. A failure to acknowledge human sinfulness
  - **1 John.1:8-9**— If we say that we have no sin, we are deceiving ourselves and the truth is not in us.<sup>9</sup> If we confess our sins, He is faithful and righteous to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness
3. A denial of any sinful deeds
  - **1 John 1:10**— If we say that we have not sinned, we make Him a liar and His word is not in us.

There is always some way or another that we are falling short of God's glory. There is no perfection in this life. When men indict us, we must listen to see if there is any truth in what they say. But if God indicts us, we must never question God's judgment, but pray,

- **Psalm 139:23-24**— Search me, O God, and know my heart;  
Try me and know my anxious thoughts;  
<sup>24</sup> And see if there be any hurtful way in me,  
And lead me in the everlasting way

#### D. God's answer (v.8)

- <sup>8</sup> "Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings.

Now God could have unleashed a grocery list of ways that they had strayed from Him, but He focused on *one*, and He touched it with a rhetorical question—"*Will a man rob God?*"

The verb translated "**rob**" (*qaba*) is rare in the Old Testament. It means *to take forcibly, to circumvent, to assail insidiously*. It is the same root from which the name "Jacob" is formed. Can a man cheat God? Will a man defraud God?

Blunted stated, *Israel was indicted by God for being, not a petty thief, but a straight-up robber!* A thief creeps in and steals when no one is watching, BUT a robber will take what is yours in broad daylight! Now robbing a store or a bank would be bad enough, but who would try to rob God? What audacity! What tomfoolery! Who would think of doing such a thing? God lays the charge of divine indictment against them, "*Yet you are robbing Me!*"

But their response was, "**how have we robbed You?**" The Lord was ready with the evidence. "***In tithes and offerings.***"

A robbery can only take place if *we take from someone something that belongs to him or her.* What God is declaring to us is that the tithe belongs to Him.

- **Leviticus 27:30-32**— Thus all the tithe of the land, of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD'S; it is holy to the LORD. <sup>31</sup> If, therefore, a man wishes to redeem part of his tithe, he shall add to it one-fifth of it. <sup>32</sup> For every tenth part of herd or flock, whatever passes under the rod, the tenth one shall be holy to the LORD.
- **Numbers 18:26, 28**— Moreover, you shall speak to the Levites and say to them, "When you take from the sons of Israel the tithe which I have given you from them for your inheritance, then you shall present an offering from it to the LORD, a tithe of the tithe."...<sup>28</sup> So you shall also present an offering to the LORD from your tithes, which you receive from the sons of Israel; and from it you shall give the LORD'S offering to Aaron the priest.

The "**tithe**" was literally a 10th of all produce and livestock which the people possessed. A tithe was to be given to the Levites who in turn were to give a tithe of the tithe to the priests (*Num.18:27-32*). The Israelites were also to bring a tithe of their produce and animals and eat it with the Levites before the Lord in Jerusalem as an act of festal worship (*Deut.12:5-18; 14:22-26*). Also every third year a tithe was to

be stored up in the towns for Levites, strangers, widows, and orphans (*Deut. 14:27–29*). While the word “offerings” may refer to offerings in general, it seems to refer here (*Mal.3:8c*) to those portions of the offerings (as well as those portions of the tithes) designated for the priests (*Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*). If the Levites and priests would not receive the tithes and offerings, they would have to turn to other means of supporting themselves. As a result, the temple ministry would suffer.<sup>2</sup>

This is what we see in many churches today. Because of *the lack of faithfulness and trusting God* on the part of the members, the ministry suffers. Let me cut to the chase—*The tithe belongs to the Lord*.

When we fail to bring the tithe or any contributions as He blesses, we are guilty of the sin of robbing God. Under the second indictment—the issue was *the quality of the sacrifices (1:6-2:9)*. Here the issue is *the quantity of the offerings*. Giving matters to God. Not because He needs the money, but because it is an issue of obedience. This disobedience on the part of God’s people brought about...

## E. God’s curse (v.9)

- <sup>9</sup> You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you!

What does it mean to be cursed with a curse? The verb “**curse**” means “*to bind with a curse*.” It can be translated, “*you are under a curse, you are now being afflicted with a curse*.” The word “curse” is definite (“*with the curse, you are being curse*”). There is a curse, a curse on all of you.

What the prophet is doing is equating the experience of difficulty and indifference toward the things of God directly to the robbery or cheating of God in the failure to give the tithe.

1. Who was guilty of this sin? Was it just a few in the nation? Was it just the *poor and struggling* Jews of the land? No, God said, “*for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you!*”

The whole nation...*everyone*. The sin of the leaders had affected the people and vice-versa. Now someone would say, but surely there were some who were faithful! And no doubt there were. But this window in the Old Testament is setting us up for the New Testament principle of mutual unity and dependence of the body (*1 Cor.12:26; Eph.4:16*). God loves us individually as if we were the only child He has, but He deals with us corporately—and there is no getting away from the truth that Paul gives when he asks, “*Do you not know that a little leaven, leavens the whole lump?*” (*1 Cor.5:6*).

2. How does this look in practical terms? There is a moving account of what this curse looks like in practical terms. The previous generation failed to heed God’s call, and the same thing was continuing.

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<sup>2</sup> Blaising, C. A. (1985). [Malachi](#). In J. F. Walvoord & R. B. Zuck (Eds.), *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures* (Vol. 1, pp. 1584–1585). Wheaton, IL: Victor Books.



a. The problem? They had a wrong sense of priorities.

- **Haggai 1:3-5**— Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying, <sup>4</sup> “Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies desolate*?” <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways!”
- **Haggai 1:6-9**— You have sown much, but harvest little; *you* eat, but *there is not enough* to be satisfied; *you* drink, but *there is not enough* to become drunk; *you* put on clothing, but no one is warm *enough*; and he who earns, earns wages *to put* into a purse with holes.” <sup>7</sup> Thus says the LORD of hosts, “Consider your ways!” <sup>8</sup> Go up to the mountains, bring wood and rebuild the temple, that I may be pleased with it and be glorified,” says the LORD. <sup>9</sup> “*You* look for much, but behold, *it comes* to little; when you bring *it* home, I blow it *away*. Why?” declares the LORD of hosts, “Because of My house which *lies desolate*, while each of you runs to his own house.”

b. The solution? Take God seriously by getting their act together. As long as God’s house and His work remained neglected, they would be losing out.

- **Haggai 1:10-11**— Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. <sup>11</sup> I called for a drought on the land, on the mountains, on the grain, on the new wine, on the oil, on what the ground produces, on men, on cattle, and on all the labor of your hands.”

They needed to give careful thought to their lifestyle in order to see how easily it is to become so cluttered with secular interest and non-essentials that there is less and less time for the things that really matter. So do we. Will we take heed?

## F. God’s promise of blessing (vv.10-12)

- <sup>10</sup> “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the LORD of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. <sup>11</sup> Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast *its grapes*,” says the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup> “All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,” says the LORD of hosts.
1. Was this an Old Testament form of prosperity theology? Absolutely not! The poisonous teaching of prosperity theology places man on the throne and subjugates God to achieve what man’s sinful heart desires! It is a lie from the pit of hell. This promise of blessing was more than a legalistic giving to fulfill their obligations to the law. At the heart of God’s promise was this extraordinary and rare divine challenge to “*test Me*.” Now, this was not a contradiction or violation of the prohibition against “testing God” given in Deuteronomy 6:16,
    - <sup>16</sup> “You shall not put the LORD your God to the test, as you tested *Him* at Massah.

No, the word for “**testing**” (*nasa*) in that context means to “*try or prove or even to tempt from a posture of arrogance and cynical unbelief.*” Here a different term is used (*bahan*) which means testing from a *posture of honest doubt, with the intent to encourage and approve faith in God.* It is a divine invitation to prove the faithfulness of Yahweh to His covenant promises by the experience of our obedience.

2. What could they expect if they obeyed God and returned?

a. The blessing of abundance

- “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.

The “**windows of heaven**” is a figure of speech for *rainfall and abundant agricultural produce as a tangible sign of God’s covenant blessing (Deut.28:1-19)*. “**Overflows**” quantifies God’s blessing. It would be so great that there would not be room for it. The point is clear: God’s response to the obedience of His people brings tangible results. It results in an abundance of provision on one hand, and protection of the other.

- <sup>11</sup> Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast *its grapes*,” says the LORD of hosts.

When we trust the Lord, we can be assured that there will not be “crop failure” in the work of the kingdom.

b. The blessing of influence

- <sup>12</sup> “All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,” says the LORD of hosts.

“**Blessed**” instead of *cursed*. “**Delightful**” instead of *desolate*. No one wants to live in a desolate place, and that’s what the land looked like when God cursed it. It became a place of scorn and shame (*Jer.18:16; Lam.2:15*).

When we live in disobedience, the world shakes its head at us in shame and disgust. But faithfulness and obedience to God bring blessing, beauty, productivity, fruitfulness, and encouragement to others.

An important first step in this *reversal* and *renewal* was trusting God with the tithe.

Matthew Henry once said,

No man ever yet lost by serving God with a whole heart, nor gained by serving Him with a half one. We may compromise with conscience for half the price, but God will not endorse the compromise; and like Ananias and Sapphira, we shall lose not only what we thought we had purchased so cheaply, but also the price we paid for it. If we would have God ‘open’ His treasury, we must open ours. One cause of barrenness of the Church is parsimony (tightfistedness) of its members.

## CONCLUSION:

Does it pay to obey God?

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