

MBC – 7/5/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson

“What Belongs to God?”

Malachi 3:7-12

We come back to our study of Malachi’s prophecy this morning. He keeps hitting us right between the eyes, exposing our sins, and at the same time revealing the infinite mercy and forgiveness of God. Let’s pray before we begin.

Notice the comparison between God and His people—

- Malachi 3:6–12 ⁶“For I the LORD do not change; *therefore* you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. [But] ⁷From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.

God had always been faithful to His people: faithful in His patience, faithful in His promises – if not, He would have wiped them out for their sins, long ago.

But they had continually turned away from Him, disobeyed His commands, put Him to the test, and gone after other gods. Malachi is saying: God doesn’t change, and His people don’t change much either. But look at how God continues to call His wandering people back—

- “Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts.

His arms are open! Creator God is reaching out and offering to take them back. He is so gracious. And how do they respond?

- “But you say, ‘How shall we return?’” I.e., “What do You mean, It’s not like we need to repent of anything!”

So God gets *very* specific. “Okay, how about the 7th commandment, ‘You shall not steal?’—

- ⁸Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. ¹⁰Bring 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. ¹¹I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹²Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

They are stealing from God, but God still wants to pour out blessing on them! Amazing.

What is the definition of stealing? To *take* something that belongs to another – or, to *keep* something that belongs to another. (repeat)

You don’t have to wear a mask and rob a bank to be a thief – although you do have to wear a mask to deposit your check at the bank, but that’s another issue. But you’re also guilty of theft if you don’t give a person what belongs to them. If you don’t pay a bill you owe, that’s stealing. And God here accuses His people of *robbery* because they were keeping for themselves what rightfully belonged to Him. Do you and I ever do that? We need to talk about—

I. Ownership and stewardship.

A. God owns everything.

Before we get into this issue of tithing, the bigger question we need to ask this morning is “*What belongs to God?*” Because if I keep for myself what rightfully belongs to God, that is stealing. And Jesus told a story to another group of cynical Jews that answers this question head on—

- Matthew 22:16–21 ¹⁶And they (Pharisees) sent their disciples to Him, along with the Herodians, saying, “Teacher, we know that you are true and teach the way of God truthfully, and you do not care about anyone’s opinion, for you are not swayed by appearances. (bunch of hypocritical schmoozers!) ¹⁷Tell us, then, what you think. Is it lawful to pay taxes to Caesar, or not?” ¹⁸But Jesus, aware of their malice, said, “Why put me to the test, you hypocrites? ¹⁹Show me the coin for the tax.” And they brought him a denarius. ²⁰And Jesus said to them, “Whose likeness (the word is “image”) and inscription is this?” ²¹They said, “Caesar’s.” Then he said to them, “Therefore render to Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God the things that are God’s.”

Now the denarius they handed Jesus was a solid silver coin. On one side was an engraving of the Emperor Tiberius sitting on his throne, and the words: “Tiberius Caesar Augustus, son of the divine Augustus.” On the other side was the inscription, “Pontifex Maximus” = “Highest priest.”

- This coin was proclaiming that the current emperor, Tiberius, was the Son of God, and the Highest Priest of God! This coin was like a portable idol! No wonder it drove the Jews up the wall.

And Jesus’ answer was brilliant: “Give Caesar what belongs to Caesar, “Yes, pay your taxes!”—and “render unto God what is God’s.” But Jesus was saying something profound here. Follow His logic: “Whose *image* is on this coin? Caesar’s. So give Caesar what bears his image, and *give God what bears His image!* And what bears the image of God? You. And me. And every human being on this planet.

- We all belong to God because He is our Creator and we bear His image and likeness. That includes unbelievers as well as believers, right? But believers doubly belong to God because we were bought out of sin and death for Him by the blood of Christ: “*You are not your own for you were bought with a price*” (1Cor.6.19).

Oh, we need to think about this more than we do! We belong to God, we are not our own! So Jesus tells us to give God what belongs to Him - ourselves, body and soul—

- Romans 12:1 . . . present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship.

And that includes everything we own, our money, our stuff, but also our time, our talents, our energies. Your car, your home, your 401K. It all belongs to God.

* We should wake up every morning and thank God for all His good gifts – amen? Do you do that? An ‘ungrateful Christian’ is an oxymoron – or just a moron. We should be thankful for all we have, and *humble*: even if t we worked hard for our stuff, didn’t the strength to work come your heavenly Father? Paul asked this of the boastful Corinthians—

- 1 Corinthians 4:7 What do you have that God hasn’t given you? And if everything you have is from God, why boast as though it were not a gift?

So all we have belongs to God. We are simply His stewards – caretakers, entrusted with His possessions, for a time—

B. We are the stewards of what He owns.

We don't technically own anything. Everything we have is a gift-on-loan from God! Again, not just our money, but our time, talents, even your spouse, or your kids, they all belong to God. You say, "Can I give the kids back – I saved the receipt." No.

Isn't Jesus' point in the parable of the that God expects us as His stewards, not just to take care of all He has entrusted to us, but to maximize – invest – get a return on, all He has given us to care for?

- Use whatever God has given you for His glory and for the Gospel! Money, brains, time, stuff – we should always be asking God: "Lord, how can I use _____ to bring you the most glory? How can I invest it for the spread of the Gospel?"

Ownership and stewardship – that's the biblical foundation for understanding what God is charging His people with here in Malachi: they were robbing Him by not giving Him what was *His*. And they knew what to give, because He had specified how much to give. Let's look at—

II. Old Covenant tithing.

- Malachi 3:10 ¹⁰Bring the full *tithe* into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.

Tithe means "tenth," and this was required giving under the Law of Moses. But what most Christians don't realize is that the Israelites were required to give much more than just 10%. There were actually 3 required tithes —

1. The tithe for supporting the priests and Levites.

- Numbers 18:21 ²¹"To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting,

Remember God chose the tribe of the Levites to serve in the Temple – the priests came from the tribe of Levi – and the tithe was their pay. They didn't own land, and they didn't have other jobs, so the people gave 10% of their produce and animals to the Levites to support them in their ministry to the nation.

- And even today in poor rural areas, a lot of pastors get part of their pay in chickens and taters!

But because Israel was a theocracy – a nation under the rule of God – this was actually a form of taxation to support those who ran their government. During the reign of good King Hezekiah, when he was making Israel great again, we read this—

- 2 Chronicles 31:4 ⁴And he commanded the people who lived in Jerusalem to give the portion due to the priests and the Levites, that they might give themselves to the Law of the LORD.

The people needed to pay their tithes so that the priests and Levites could study and teach God's Word without being burdened by having to work side jobs to support themselves. But by the time of Nehemiah – which is the same time Malachi is preaching – this actually happened—

- Nehemiah 13:10–11 ¹⁰I also found out that the portions of the Levites had not been given to them, so that the Levites and the singers, who did the work, had fled each to his field. (Part-time ministry, part-time farmers. Reminds us of when Paul was in Corinth and had to make tents to support himself until Timothy arrived with support from the Macedonian churches.) ¹¹So I confronted the officials and said, “Why is the house of God forsaken?” And he demanded that the people give their tithes so that worship and the word would not suffer.

Beloved, Malachi was speaking to people who were stingy in their giving – maybe they thought the priests were doing such a lousy job they didn’t deserve anything better. But as the saying goes, they were cutting off their nose to spite their face because when worship and the word suffer, God’s people suffer, amen? But when God’s people support their shepherds and teachers, they are the beneficiaries of their own generosity. That’s why Paul said—

- 1 Corinthians 9:13–14 ¹³Do you not know that those who are employed in the temple service get their food from the temple, and those who serve at the altar share in the sacrificial offerings? ¹⁴In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.
- 1 Timothy 5:17–18 ¹⁷Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. ¹⁸For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”

2. The annual tithe for national worship and unity.

- Deuteronomy 12:10–11 ¹⁰But when you go over the Jordan and live in the land that the LORD your God is giving you to inherit, and when he gives you rest from all your enemies around, so that you live in safety, ¹¹then to the place that the LORD your God will choose, to make his name dwell there, there you shall bring all that I command you: your burnt offerings and your sacrifices, your tithes and the contribution that you present, and all your finest vow offerings that you vow to the LORD.

This was another tithe in addition to the one to support the priests and Levites, and this was for a big ole potluck! God commanded it for the people to eat and worship together. Guess it was that important. Then there was one more tithe, but this was once every 3 years—

3. The tithe for the poor.

- Deuteronomy 14:28–29 ²⁸“At the end of every three years you shall bring out all the tithe of your produce in the same year and lay it up within your towns. ²⁹And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do.

Isn’t that interesting that God *commanded* the people to care for poor, widows, orphans, and aliens – it wasn’t optional. So put these 3 tithes together and it comes out to about 23% per year for *required* giving. This was like a taxation to support their theocratic nation. But if you read the OT carefully, other giving was required too – like leaving the corners of your field unharvested so the poor could glean among the sheaves. There was the annual third of a shekel temple tax.

If you think about it, when you average out all of our taxes today – it probably comes close to what the Israelites required to pay. And none of this was optional. But in addition to the required giving, they could also offer up freewill gifts and offerings. They did this when they built the Temple. Let me read just a bit—

- Exodus 35:4–5 ⁴Moses said to all the congregation of the people of Israel, “This is the thing that the LORD has commanded. ⁵Take from among you a contribution to the LORD. Whoever is of a generous heart, let him bring the LORD’s contribution: gold, silver, and bronze;

It goes on to say that God moved the people’s hearts in a mighty way, so that this was the result—

- Exodus 36:5–6 They came to Moses and said: “The people bring much more than enough for doing the work that the LORD has commanded us to do.” ⁶So Moses gave command, and word was proclaimed throughout the camp, “Let no man or woman do anything more for the contribution for the sanctuary.” So the people were restrained from bringing, ⁷for the material they had was sufficient to do all the work, and more.

But this generous, freewill giving isn’t what God was rebuking His people about. It was the required giving that they were holding back on. And God calls it theft.

- But again, don’t miss that God is pleading with them to give what they owe so that He can bless their socks off!

III. New Covenant giving.

So the question we have is this: ***“Is tithing required for New Covenant Christians?”***

And the answer is a simple no. I’ve read good men who say otherwise, but this is simple: We are not under the Law of Moses, period. And tithing is never commanded in the New Testament, period. Now Jesus *spoke* about tithing, but that was before the cross, and the Jews were still under the Law of Moses. We are not, and tithing isn’t taught or assumed in the NT.

But the New Testament says a *lot* about giving, and I’m just going to give you a summary this morning—

A. The purpose of New Covenant giving.

Yes, God’s children are still to give, and for the same reasons: ownership and stewardship – it’s all God’s – and whatever He has given to us, we are to manage as His stewards. And God wants us to give a generous portion of the money He has entrusted to us for the same purposes as in the OT—

1.) To support the work of the ministry of the Word.

I already mentioned a few passages, but this was a given in the early church—

- Galatians 6:6 ⁶Let the one who is taught the word share all good things with the one who teaches.

Pastors, missionaries, church planters, should all be supported in their work so that they can be undistracted in their Gospel ministries. We are so excited about Ashlee’s desire to go to Cameroon as a mis-

sionary to get the Bible to the Baka people in their own language. And we want her to be *fully* supported so she can devote herself *fully* to that call. Amen?

And just as in the OT, when God's people invest in the ministry of the Word, they are the beneficiaries!

*I'm only able to do what I do because of your generosity. When I first got the call to pastor a new church down in L.A., 36 years ago - I was working full-time. I had to fit in all of my study time, and shepherding, before or after work and on the weekends. I was younger then! But that little church decided that for their own sakes, they needed a full-time pastor, and once they made that financial commitment, everything in the church took off.

2. To support the needy, widows and orphans.

Much of Paul's ministry was fundraising from the churches to support other churches that were in need. When he sought the blessing of the Apostles in Jerusalem for his ministry he writes—

- Galatians 2:10 ¹⁰Only, they asked us to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do.

Collecting money for the poor saints in Jerusalem was the background behind 2Cor.8-9 – two entire chapters devoted to giving. Half of 1 Tim.5 is devoted to specific instructions on supporting widows. MBC has always sought to help needy folks, inside and outside the church. We recently helped one of our widows with her dental bill, and fixed a plumbing problem for another widow. Many of you have been helped from our benevolent fund, and we can do that because you folks generously support our benevolent fund.

So Christians today are to give generously from the money God has entrusted them to support the ministry of the Word – getting the Gospel out; and to help meet needs. That is the same under both covenants.

B. The procedure for NC giving.

1.) Where do we give?

When the saints in Jerusalem were in need, they sold land and homes and brought the money to the Apostles. Later, money was entrusted to the church elders. The lion's share of your giving should go to your own local church to support the ministry of the Word. This is that amount that you have purposed in your heart, as God has prospered you, and it should be a regular amount – because the bills of the church come regularly. The elders then determine the church's budget based on that giving.

*But Christians are also free to give spontaneously to needs that arise – you folks do that all the time: you give money, you make meals, our church has given more cars to people than I can count! And you are free to give to other ministries or missionaries as God leads you too. You are free in Christ! But when you give to MBC, you can know that we use that money to support ministries that are in line our doctrine and our vision.

C. The heart behind NC giving.

1.) As God has prospered.

- Dt.16:17: Even under Moses: "Every man shall give as he is able, *according to the blessing* of the Lord your God which He has given you." This was talking about freewill giving, not the tithe; What was the measure? They were to give in proportion to how God had blessed them.
- 1 Corinthians 16:2 ²On the first day of every week, each of you is to put something aside and store it up, *as he may prosper*, so that there will be no collecting when I come. (Make up your mind, according to how God has blessed you.)
- 2 Corinthians 8:12–15 ¹²For if the readiness is there, it is acceptable according to what a person has, not according to what he does not have. ¹³For I do not mean that others should be eased and you burdened, but that as a matter of fairness ¹⁴your abundance at the present time should supply their need, so that their abundance may supply your need, that there may be fairness. ¹⁵As it is written, "Whoever gathered much had nothing left over, and whoever gathered little had no lack."

2.) Willingly and cheerfully.

- 2 COR 9:6,7: "Let each one do just as he has purposed in his heart; not grudgingly or under compulsion; for God loves a cheerful giver." Don't allow yourself to be manipulated or coerced in matter of giving--do it purposefully--that means with forethought, with wisdom, but do it *cheerfully*. The word cheerful is *the Gk. hilaron* from which we get the word exhilarating, and hilarious. Giving to the Lord should be joyful, it should be worship.

I think the happiest people I have know are Christians who are generous givers. I have never, ever heard a generous person complain that they gave too much! Like the Macedonians Paul praises in—

- 2 Corinthians 8:3–4 ³For they gave according to their means, as I can testify, and beyond their means, of their own accord, ⁴begging us earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints—

They actually begged Paul for the blessing of being a part of his collection for the needy saints in Jerusalem! And they gave according to what they had – but they even went beyond that, which is another mark of NC giving. Christians are to give—

3.) Sacrificially.

This is when you give so much that you put yourself in need – and you trust that God will meet your needs—

- Mark 12:41-44 And he sat down opposite the treasury and watched the people putting money into the offering box. Many rich people put in large sums – (they were giving *according to* what they had, but) a poor widow came and put in two small copper coins, which make a penny. And he called his disciples to him and said to them, "Truly, I say to you, this poor widow has put in more than all those who are contributing to the offering box. For they all contributed out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty has put in everything she had, all she had to live on."

So who gave more? This woman was completely depending upon the mercy of God – she was really doing what God said through Malachi: "Test Me in this! See if I won't more than make up for what you give to Me!" That's the heart of biblical giving: you believe God will take care of your needs when you sacri-

fice to meet the needs of others. You are banking on the blessing because God told you to! Mother Teresa said, "Give until it hurts." Someone else improved on that and said, "Give until it no longer hurts!"

***Never judge another for what they give – or don't give.**

How many people misjudged that poor widow that day in the Temple? None of us here know all the circumstances of others. I happen to know that some folks have bills and expenses that the rest of us don't know anything about – some are supporting family members, or helping out other folks in need – and for you or me to judge them because don't seem to be giving what they can, would be unloving and wrong. Isn't it true that in God's providence in our lives, sometimes we're on the giving end, and sometimes we're on the receiving end? Paul's words apply to every one of us here—

- Romans 14:4 ⁴Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Lord is able to make him stand.

Under the OC, giving was cut and dry: pay your tithes. You obeyed or you disobeyed. But under the NC, it's much more about the heart, and only God can see the heart.

- This is why I don't know what anyone in the church gives and I don't want to know. It's none of my business. Only Chelsie knows because she is the bookkeeper – but she is on FaceBook – just so you know.

So the NT does not teach tithing as a command for Christians living under the New Covenant. If you've settled on 10% between and God, that's great. God bless you. You will be a happy Christian!

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I could much more, but let's back to our passage. How did God punish His people for their disobedience—

- Malachi 3:9 ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

Specifically, how did God punish them? The punishment fit the crimes: they withheld what belonged to God – He withheld His provisions for them. You would think they would have learned their lesson! Just a few years earlier, when the first exiles returned to Jerusalem from Persia to rebuild the Temple, they got sidetracked and stopped working on the Temple to build their own fancy homes. God sent Haggai to give them the Word of the Lord—

- Haggai 1:2–6 ²Thus says the LORD of hosts: These people say the time has not yet come to rebuild the house of the LORD." ³Then the word of the LORD came by the hand of Haggai the prophet, ⁴"Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? ⁵Now, therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts: Consider your ways. ⁶You have sown much, and harvested little. You eat, but you never have enough; you drink, but you never have your fill. You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm. And he who earns wages does so to put them into a bag with holes.
- ⁹You looked for much, and behold, it came to little. And when you brought it home, I blew it away. Why? declares the LORD of hosts. Because of my house that lies in ruins, while each of you busies himself with his own house. ¹⁰Therefore the heavens above you have withheld the dew, and the earth has withheld its produce. ¹¹And I have called for a drought on the land and the hills, on the grain, the new wine, the oil, on what the ground brings forth, on man and beast, and on all their labors."

It shouldn't have been hard for them to connect the dots! You say, "Boy, I'm glad I'm not livin' in those times!" Oh, hold on! The very same principle is in the NT, right? Paul said—

- 2 Corinthians 9:6 ⁶The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.

Are you having financial problems? Never seems to be enough money for all the bills? It could be that you are *reaping* sparingly because you are *sowing* sparingly. Beloved, what you give to God shouldn't be the last consideration when you do your budget – it should be first. God should get the firstfruits, not the leftovers.

III. "Test Me!"

God's desire and *promise* was to bless them if they would only obey Him. He says something that should shock us—

- Malachi 3:10 ¹⁰Bring 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,

Wait – "test Me?" God clobbered the Israelites in the wilderness when they put Him to the test. Jesus said, "You shall not put the Lord your God to the test!" But here He says, "*Please*, test Me! Take Me up on My promise, please, I want to show you how abundantly I will bless you when You trust Me."

- Malachi 3:10–12 (ESV) [see] if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. ¹¹I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹²Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.

After all of their backsliding, and complacency, even talking back to God in the midst of their own disobedience – God wants to bless them. Beloved, OC or NC, this is the heart of God toward His people—

- Psalm 81:13–14 ¹³Oh, that my people would listen to me, that Israel would walk in my ways! ¹⁴I would soon subdue their enemies and turn my hand against their foes. V.16 . . .He would feed you with the finest of the wheat, and with honey from the rock I would satisfy you."

And Jesus Himself said "Test Me, take Me on My word, and let Me show you My faithfulness toward My church—

- Luke 6:38 ³⁸give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you."

So what do you have that belongs to God? What are you doing with it? Is your first thought when you get unexpected money (like a stimulus check), "What do I want to spend this money on?" or "What would God have me do with His money?"

* * *

Two men who tested God.

I want to tell you a true story about two men who put God to the test with their money – and found out that He keeps His promises.

The first man was **R.G. LeTourneau**, one of the most successful businessmen of the 20th century. He was born in 1887, dropped out of school in the 7th grade, but got a job as a mechanic on the first cars. He literally taught himself engineering and after serving in WWI he got a job for a rancher to level some land – at that time the only way land was levelled and roads were built was with work crews of men using mules and plows. LeTourneau began designing earth-moving machines to do the job, and eventually had over 300 patents for his inventions. LeTourneau is basically responsible for the machines that built our modern highways.

And he was a serious Christian man. And he and his wife Evelyn had committed themselves to giving 10% of their money to the Lord – even through hard times. By 1935, they were millionaires and Evelyn read Malachi and said, “Let’s put God to the test, let’s give God **90%**, and we’ll live on the other **10%**!”

God blessed them beyond what they could have imagined. LeTourneau became a millionaire during the Depression. He gave 10’s of millions of dollars to churches, missions, and founded LeTourneau University in Texas, a Christian school for engineering. 3 of our MCS grads went to LeTourneau for degrees in engineering!

- When people would ask R.G. LeTourneau what made him so wealthy he would say, “I shovel out the money, and God shovels it back — but God has a bigger shovel.”

The second man was his brother-in-law, Evelyn’s brother, **Howard Peterson**. He was also a Christian, and went into business with LeTourneau, and became hugely successful as head of Caterpillar Co. – pretty successful company – Janice and I own stock! His company provided the machines that helped build the Golden Gate Bridge, the Bay Bridge, the Shasta Dam, the California Aqueduct and Treasure Island! And Howard Peterson followed in his brother-in-law’s footsteps and gave huge amounts of money for missions and to build churches in northern California, including, in 1986, a beautiful church in Middletown, CA. And when we had a vision for Middletown Christian School, Mr. Peterson, who was very elderly by then, gave us a generous gift to get our school off the ground – and until the day he died, he gave monthly to MBC. Amazing man.

They put God to the test, and God proved His promise is true: You can’t out give God.