

 **Main Street**
UNITED METHODIST CHURCH



Malachi 3:7-12
“God Issues A Dare”

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(24th Sunday After Pentecost)

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“Following Christ From City Center!”

MALACHI 3:7-12 "GOD ISSUES A DARE"

1) v.7a,b INDICTMENT AND PROMISE: GENERAL DISOBEDIENCE.

Spoken By Prophet Malachi To All Israel, 500-450BC

a) v.7a General Indictment Of Israel's Forgetting God's Law.

7 From the days of your fathers Legacy = Learned Bad Behavior, Neglect From Forebears!
you have turned aside from my statues and have not kept them. A Generational Disobedience Problem
One Generation Turns Aside; The Next Generation Is Born Lost

b) v.7b General Invitation And Promise Of Renewed Divine Presence.

Return to me, //James 4:7, Repentance As An Invitation To Presence
and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts (armies). Zechariah 1:3, Lord Of Angelic Armies

2) v.7c THEIR QUESTION: HOW?

But you say, "How shall we return?" Not Even Aware Of Generational Departure

3) v.8a GOD'S COUNTER-QUESTION AND ANSWER.

8 Q Will a man rob God? No, Not In The Long Term
A Yet you are robbing me. A Crime, 8th Commandment, "You shall not steal."
Guess Who Loses?

2') v.8b THEIR QUESTION: HOW?

But you say, "How are we robbing thee?"

1') vv.8c-12 INDICTMENT AND PROMISE: SPECIFIC DISOBEDIENCE.

Rom. 1:18-32, A Curse Is When God Leaves Us To Ourselves, Blessing Is Absent

a) vv.8c-9 Curse: Whole Nation Of Israel.

9 In your tithes and offerings. Offerings Are In Addition To The Tithe (10%)
You are cursed with a curse because you are robbing me;
the whole nation of you. Comprehensive Blight, Not Merely Individual But A National Sin/Judgment
Few Miracles, Few Conversions, Little Unity In The Church

b) v.10 Positive Results Of Tithing: Abundance Of Support.

10 Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, Again, Agricultural Imagery
that there may be food in my house; The Temple/National Worship/ Priesthood
and thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, A Dare From God!
if I will not open the windows of heaven (rain?) for you Divine Action
and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. Agricultural Economy

b') v.11 Positive Results Of Tithing: Protection For Wasting.

11 I will rebuke the devourer (devouring locust) for you, What Eats Away At Prosperity?
so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil; Do You Have A Hole In Your Wallet?
and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts.

a') v.12 Blessing: By All Nations.

12 Then all nations will call you blessed, Promise To Abraham, Genesis 12:3
for your will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. What If We Were A Church Of Delight?

James 4:7, "Draw near to God and he will draw near to you." God Enables Our Return, Offers A Reward

- a In Matthew 23:23 Jesus said, "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites!
b for you **tithe** mint and dill and cummin (i.e. table spices), 3 Spices
and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; 3 Virtues
a' **these you ought to have done**,
b' without neglecting the others." Major In Minors = Avoidance

GOD ISSUES A DARE

"Will a man rob God?"

Malachi's sobering question.

M A L A C H I 3 : 8 a

World Vision is the world's largest Christian relief and development organization. Richard Stearns is now President, and in his book *The Hole In Our Gospel* tells a story from his days as CEO of Lenox, Inc.:

"Black Friday in 1987 was the largest, single-day stock market crash since 1929. In one day Renee and I lost more than a third of our life's savings and the money we put aside for our kids' education. I became a man obsessed, each night working past midnight, analyzing on spreadsheets all we lost.... I was consumed with anguish over lost money. One night Renee came and sat beside me. "Honey, we have our marriage, our health, our friends, our children, and a good income— so much to be thankful for. You need to let go of this and trust God."

He then continues, "Don't you hate it when someone crashes your pity party? I didn't want to let go. I was responsible for our family, and she didn't understand. It was my job to worry about things like this."

She suggested we pray— something that hadn't occurred to me— so we did. At the end, Renee said, "Now I think we need to get out the checkbook and write some big checks to our church and ministries we support. We need to show God we know this is his money, not ours."

I was flabbergasted, but in my heart I knew she was right. That night we wrote some sizable checks, and that's when I felt the wave of relief. We'd broken the spell money cast over me. It freed me from the worries that consumed me. I actually felt reckless and giddy, "God, please catch us, because we just took a crazy leap of faith."¹

¹ Edited, (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010), 213.

That story helps us approach perhaps the most nervy, taboo topic in America—money. There are hot-buttons to make any conversation go nuclear. You know them: religion, health, politics, death. But when it comes to the most difficult, a 2014 survey from Wells Fargo found a clear winner: money. Karen Wimbish, a company executive said, "I don't know we expected that." Forty-four percent say personal finances is the most challenging chat anyone can have. Even the terror of death comes in second at 38, politics at 35, religion at 32 percent. And when it comes to Christian thinking about the meaning of money, the issue of the tithe cannot be overlooked because it's so basic to biblical thinking and faithful living.

TURNING TO THE TEXT

A Brief Overview Of Tithing

The Hebrew word for tithe simply means *a tenth*, and the concept was not confined to Jews.² It was common in that world to set aside ten percent of one's possessions for the maintenance of worship and ceremonial civic functions which were not separated. Most of Israel's polytheistic neighbors practiced tithing. One female scholar comments, "Every people on earth has realized there is Something or Someone beyond them which demands their devotion."³ The desire to give back to God is part of the general revelation planted in every heart. When we read in Genesis 14:20 of Abraham who tithed to the priest Melchizedek, we need to understand it, not as something new, but something Abraham brought with him into his new relationship with God. It was a symbol of loyalty and devotion God accepted.

It is difficult to systematize the teaching on tithing from the books of Deuteronomy, Numbers, and Leviticus. The specifics of Who? When? and For whom? varied and developed over time. But the underlying assumption is Leviticus 27:30. "All the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the trees, is the LORD's; it is holy to the LORD." The tithe is not like any other resource; it's different, set apart to God and therefore *holy* as a reminder of God's universal ownership. Not yours, not mine, all of it the Lord's, with the tithe as a reminder.

² Bennett W. Smith, *Handbook On Tithing* (Elgin, ILL: Progressive Baptist Publishing House, n.d), 29.

³ Elizabeth Achtemeier, *Malachi* (Atlanta, John Know, 1980), 190.

Malachi 3:7-12 5

Jesus also had a lot to say about stewardship, about being wise and generous managers. Twenty of his twenty-four parables deal with it in some way, but there is little explicitly on tithing, though once— while criticizing the Pharisees— he endorsed the accepted practice, as long it was not used as a religious excuse to avoid the weightier issues of justice, mercy, and faith.⁴ As a loyal Jew who came to fulfill the law rather than cancel it,⁵ Jesus no doubt tithed and gave offerings, as did Paul⁶ and the rest of the apostles. It was a discipline of faithful Jews. But the argument is basically from silence. Is there little mention of tithing in the New Testament because all the authors were Jews and assumed it, or because it was no longer important? I think the former, but you will have to make your own decision.

We know that by the 4th century tithing was compulsory for Christians, that in the 6th century persons were excommunicated for not tithing, and that after the Protestant Reformation in the 16th century the compulsory system was in some places replaced by voluntarism. While Baptists and other churches have long emphasized tithing, only in recent years have United Methodists begun to reemphasize the biblical pattern. It may interest you to know that in some churches the slogan is *Leaders Tithe and Tithers Lead*.⁷ I like that. Not the amount because church offices are not for sale, but the percentage; that's what counts, a commitment to grow towards the tithe and beyond. A good summary is Charles Isbell in his commentary on Malachi:

"...there is no push within the biblical text itself to harmonize or to homogenize these different views of tithing into a single universal rule.... Basic to all of the Old Testament passages that mention the tithe... is the assumption that *God is the real Owner of everything*.... Tithing, however done, was human acknowledgment of that fact the people ought to stop and give thanks to God in some meaningful way for allowing them to enjoy His property for a while."⁸

⁴ Matthew 23:23.

⁵ Matthew 5:17.

⁶ Philippians 3:6b.

⁷ *44 Ways to Expand the Financial Base of Your Congregation* (Nashville, TN: Abington, 1989), 47.

⁸ *Malachi* (Chicago, ILL: Moody, n.d.).

Indictment, Promise, And Questions

There is often a difference between blame and consequence, and they do not always rest on the shoulders of the same generation. We may be responsible for dealing with pollution or racism or the fact that tobacco causes cancer, though begun by an earlier generation. Pointing to the failings of our forebears— as true as that may be historically— does not lessen our responsibility in the present. They did it to us in some ways, and we will do it to our offspring in different ways because of the legacy of original sin and the cross-generational iniquity it generates. As an apt analogy, what is our exploding national deficit but a bill passed on to future generations? They will have reason to resent us for plundering the treasury and leaving them the tab. It’s one reason God had to command us to honor our parents, because some of their actions are just plain dishonorable, just as some of ours will be seen by our grandchildren. Legacy— when you think carefully— is always a mixed bag. The generations sin equally, but often in different ways, and what they left us— of good or ill— is our inheritance.

You can be assured our grandchildren and their historians will say bad things about us as well. What our greed did to the economy, that we let the national infrastructure rot and never addressed the combination of promiscuity and violence which is abortion. The Baby Boomers- my generation- embraced promiscuity in the 1960's, then covered it with convenience abortion in the 1970's, and now we wonder why so many of our children and grandchildren ignore marriage, shack up, and have so many babies out of wedlock with so little conscience. We have trained our children in our favorite sins, and we have not taught them the ways of God. Malachi 3:7 is the epitaph of my generation, “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.” And to my self-indulgent baby-boomer generation, the invitation is open, “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.” It is time to unhook ourselves from the obsessions of this culture, rebuild the neglected spiritual and moral foundations, and seek God for a general awakening. And if the church does not take up the task, and if the preachers wimp out from fear and bending to the pressures of political correctness, who will? I’m not a prophet, but I am a careful observer, and what I see makes me tremble. But perhaps it’s always been this way. There is no golden age to which a return can be arranged. Every age has its own front lines, and this is ours.

The problem of God’s people not tithing in Malachi's day, about four and a half centuries before Christ as the last Old Testament prophet, was not new. In fact, it was

Malachi 3:7-12 7

already an old issue. The present generation had not been instructed by their parents and leaders, so Malachi began with an historical summary in verse 7, "From *the days of your fathers* you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them." One generation wandered off the path, and the next was born in the wilderness. The sins of the parents become the unthinking habits of their children. We are often separated from God's best, not by what we know and violate as what we don't know and therefore ignore. It is the blind spots in a car's field of vision that cause accidents, and it is blind spots in the church that rob us of God's best. Some of the things we need to know we have not been taught us, though they are plainly in the pages of the Scripture. What one generation assumes, the next neglects and the third forgets. Every generation has to go back to the basics, and one of those is the discipline of giving the tithe back to God. And for some that will take some time to grow into, but you can start today. Know what percentage you give and take a step forward in 2016.

As a child I was taught to give, a quarter or fifty cents in an envelope on Sunday mornings, but I was not taught to tithe, and neither were my parents from what I can find out. It was not modeled because it was not taught, and had not been for a while. We thought tipping was OK. Our envelopes did not have the boxes to check for bringing your Bible or your tithe, nor do I ever remember a sermon on the subject till I visited a Baptist Church soon after my reconversion at age nineteen. I began tithing shortly after I entered the ministry at Lori's instigation, and frankly wonder what blessings I missed from not starting the practice earlier. I'm a better Christian for marrying a Baptist girl!

The lasting impression from my childhood is that money is secret, not something you talk about at church or at home. The same way with spiritual gifts, prayer for healing, the reality of the Evil One, evangelism, human sexuality, and a number of other critical Christian topics. They were simply not on the menu, and so there were deficiencies in my diet that needed supplemental nutrition later on. What I received was good; what was left out was also important. I understand now why these topics were avoided (they were uncomfortable and demanding in terms of world view and lifestyle), but that does not free me from responsibility in the present. To say, "Well, I never heard of that before," is no excuse to ignore it now.

Malachi's generation had not been instructed and needed teaching on the tithe. This is why the Lord sent a prophet and issued such a gracious invitation in verse 7, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts." Respond to the grace of God's word through the prophet, and God will manifest his presence. Obey

Malachi's word, and God's himself will come to you. That is as close to a spiritual law as I know. Turn to God, and God will turn to you. Pursue the Lord, and he will let himself be found. But don't mistake your turning for your own unaided initiative; underneath your desire for God is God's own gracious desire for you, what Methodists call *prevenient grace*. Since God always makes the first move towards us, our faith and return is always a response.

An old saint once said to me, "Phil, if you feel far from God, guess who moved?" I wish I could tell you repentance is a once-for-all deal. It's not. It begins at a point in time but never finishes. All our life long God will be shedding new light from the Spirit-illuminated Scriptures and calling us to turn to him in some new way that forms an ever-rising spiral. The only path to holiness and real happiness is to live in repentance, not sackcloth and ashes but sensitivity to God's perspective. It may look like the same issue over and over but at a new and deeper level. For some it's their tongue, and the Lord will put a check in their spirit whenever they are about to say something they shouldn't. For others it is the issue of honesty in financial matters. For some it's building the habit of Sunday worship. All are forms of repentance. *Repent* is not necessarily an angry word. Basically it means to *change your mind* and *turn around*. Are you willing to be regularly realigned? Repentance is an invitation to life abundant; it simply describes what it means to walk with God. God gives light, and if you respond, there's a new turn in your life for the good.

When we as learn to repent quickly, at the first slight tug of God's bit in our mouth, we learn to live with very little guilt: "Yes, Lord, I hear you. Thank you for loving me enough to protect my from sinning through ignorance. I turn to you and change my thinking. Make this new insight a habit in my life." Verse 7, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts." It's a law of life. And if we don't turn and return, guess what? We get to keep going in the same direction, only the now the light gets dimmer and the divine voice fainter.⁹

Questions At The Center

At the center in verses 7 and 8 is an interesting dialog. We might laugh if it wasn't so tragic. "*How* shall we return?" they ask, "*How* are we robbing thee? We didn't know anything was wrong. The people are unaware. They're ignorant; their spiritual

⁹ Romans 1:18-32 is the classic text here. Three times it announces, "God gave them up." In the vernacular, God said, "O.K., have it your way! Your will be done."

leaders- pastors and priests- have failed to teach. Amnesia set in, and it's the fault of the pulpit, not the pew. We'd all be embarrassed to find out how many pastors do not tithe, and even more the excuses used to justify it. "I give my time, so I don't have to give money." "When they pay me more, I'll start giving." God is not impressed.

None of the ancient Hebrews had a personal copy of the Scriptures. All hand-copied; only a small percentage could read. The people were dependent on the leaders who had not been teaching them their duties, so God raised up a new voice- Malachi. The people were responsible, but they were not to blame. After Malachi they were both, and that is the danger of coming to church. This is not primarily entertainment or inspiration; it is instruction and persuasion, meant to be put into practice. If after today you decide to do nothing, whether to begin tithing or at least move in that direction, then you are accountable before God for the truths you have heard, and I'm off the hook. Hello? At the end of life I will be asked a question you will not, and it is, "Did you teach my people?"¹⁰ I intend to be able to say *Yes*.

And at the center of the center of this passage is a question and a contradiction, "Will a man rob God?" I believe Malachi took a long pause after that question to let it sink in. What if God were to reverse the tithe today: "Your income for the next six months will be ten times what you gave in the last six. Thus says the Lord." Would that make you glad, sad, or mad? "Will a man rob God?" No, not in the long run. "Yet you are robbing me," is the answer and the contradiction. Who is it that's really missing out here? The last four and a half verses give us the answer.

The Curse And Blessing Of God

It is difficult to know how much of the biblical material about the nation of Israel is applicable to us as a nation. But I find myself raising a question when I see the plague of drugs, a rising murder rate, burgeoning prison populations, gangs as substitutes for families, the rapid decline in sexual restraint, the redefinition of marriage, and now the courts in some states ordering high schools to let transgender boys share locker rooms and showers with girls. I wonder how many curious teenage boys will start wearing wigs? I can hear some of them now, "Is this a great country or what? What enlightened judges we have." Is that insane, or what? Add to this the lack of vitality in our churches, and the question is, Is the blessing of God with us? Or have we moved out of the light and towards the shadows? Are we moving into a

¹⁰ See James 3:1.

new age of barbarism? I think so. Verse 9 presents us with a new angle of vision to look at the church first and then the nation, "You are cursed with a curse because you are robbing me, *the whole nation of you.*" In the last judgment each individual will give an account, but in history God often deals with wholes, with large groups.

There are lots of ways to rob God. We rob God *doctrinally* when we water down the Christian faith as contained in Scripture and the Great Creeds. We rob God *morally* by ignoring or softening his commands. We rob God *liturgically* by worship that is half-hearted. We rob God *evangelistically* by our fear of speaking the name of his Son Jesus. And all our robbing of God visits itself back on our own heads in spiritual weakness, which is where we now are. On the street they say, "What goes around comes around." But the roots are in Galatians 6:7, "Do not be deceived; God is not mocked, *for whatever a man sows, that he will also reap.*" In other words, we create the messes in which we live and pass on to the next generation. And the only way forward and the only way up and the only way out is repentance, to accept God's invitation, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord."

These were lean times in Israel. No dark clouds on the horizon. The ground powder, the wells low, the grain stunted and brown. The agricultural situation was bad and getting worse. Conventional wisdom says that in hard times you give less to preserve what you have. But Malachi, who has God's fresh word of prophecy, invites Israel to do just the opposite and take a gamble with the Lord: verse 10:

"Bring the full tithes 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 an overflowing blessing."

Their need was rain. What's yours? Ours as a church? As a nation? Rain may still be one of them. How about a new hunger to know and seek God? Loss of appetite is a sign of illness. What about when people are hungry for everything but God's presence? Is that not a sign of advanced spiritual disease?

This issue of honoring God with a tithe off the top is not tit-for-tat, nor is it God the heavenly banker or slot machine. It is not mechanical but personal and covenantal. Tithing is an opening on my side and a channel from God's supply to my need on the other, whatever that need may be. Tithing gives me confidence to pray when there's a need, financial or otherwise: "You and I are in relationship, Lord, and

Malachi 3:7-12 **11**

the tithe is a symbol of that relationship. Therefore I ask you to meet this need as you see fit, and if you don't mind my suggestion, here it is...." I pray that way all the time.

In order to understand the promise of protection found in verse 11 we need a little lesson in weather and entomology (i.e. the study of insects). During a time of drought in the Middle East, locust eggs fall into the sand and invisibly accumulate. Then, when the rain finally comes, the microscopic eggs burst forth and the insects swarm in such numbers as to block out the sun and eat everything in sight. But God promises *to rebuke* the devouring locust for his people (literally, "the one that eats") and thus to interrupt the natural biological processes you would expect. Tithing is like insulation in a house; it doesn't keep all the cold out, but it does make a big difference.

You see, if you don't have God's protection, you need a lots of money as insulation, because something will always be eating at what you have. How much is enough when you aren't walking with God? But if you have God's protection, you don't need as much. Things last longer. Driving an old car doesn't bother you. You don't try to impress people with the quantity of your stuff but the quality of your life.

Did you know that without God's protection God's provision isn't much good? Did you know that with tithing comes an extended warranty on everything? Ask anyone who tithes. I have never in thirty-eight as a pastor met anyone who tithes who regrets it. God asks a seventh of our time- a Sabbath, a tenth of our wealth- a tithe, and all of our heart. Sabbath keeping and tithing are two foundation stones of a healthy lifestyle and a solid financial plan. It's God's wisdom for our rest and our provision. Tithing for me is easy; it's Sabbath keeping I find the more difficult.

Did you know that there is an indirect relationship between tithing and seeing people come to Christ? The direct relationship is that tithing funds church programs, building payments, missions, and training opportunities. But listen to verse 12, "Then *all nations* (that sounds like the Great Commission to me) will called you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts." God's desire was to so bless Israel that people would be drawn to them as to a magnet.

As in atomic physics, there is a critical mass in giving when the reaction takes off to release great energy. A tithing church is a happy church. This is the indirect relationship. A tithing church says to visitors, "Let the plate pass you by today. Feast on our abundance. We won't pester you with sales and raffles. We finance God's

Malachi 3:7-12 **12**

work God's way." A tithing church is a delight to lead because it frees pastors from always pestering God's people about money.

CONCLUSION

When you go to buy that new car, or trade up to your dream house, or make a new investment, or max out your plastic, or indulge yourself in any way, first ask the Malachi questions:

- 1) Am I using God's tithe for my lifestyle?
- 2) Do I sense God's overall blessing and protection in my life?
- 3) Is my church a delight because we are obeying God together?
- 4) Are diverse peoples, what Malachi calls *the nations*, being drawn to the Lord because his people are such an attractive alternative?
- 5) What if I took up God's dare and took the risk of it being true?

