

Series: Return to Me

“Robbing God”

Malachi 3:8-12

We are in the third week of a study through the Old Testament book of Malachi, called “Return to Me.” Malachi ministered and wrote just over 400 years before the birth of Christ. This should have been a wonderful time for God’s people. Remember, early in the Old Testament God established a covenant with the Jewish people and declared them to be His people and He committed to be their God. He promised to be with them and to help them, they simply needed to follow and obey Him. In fact, in establishing the covenant God said, “Here is the way, walk in it. If you obey Me, there will be great blessing, but if you disobey Me and turn away to the foreign gods, there will be great consequences.” Sadly, we see repeatedly that God’s people hardened their hearts and went their own direction. It seems that this cyclical pattern of the Israelites all throughout the Old Testament. They would draw near to God, then they would become complacent and turn to other gods, even if that meant turning to their own wants and desires. Then they would experience the pain and consequences of their actions as God judged their sin. They would eventually repent and cry out to God for mercy. God would pardon and restore them, but in time they would go right back to their same old ways. This was their unhealthy pattern all throughout the Old Testament.

By the time we get to Malachi’s day, from the outward appearance it seemed like they had finally gotten their act together. After years of spiritual struggle and complacency, they have been stirred up to work for the Lord. They had gone back to Jerusalem to rebuild their lives and to revive their worship of God. So, they get to Jerusalem where they rebuild their homes, the city walls, the Temple to worship God and they begin worshiping God as their ancestors had done. This should have been a glorious time of celebration. They are going through the outward motions of worshiping God, but they quickly realize something is missing. Something seemed “off.” Have you ever been there? Have you ever been in a worship service where it was obvious that people were worshiping God, but something just seemed “off” for you? Have you ever been in a place where you knew God’s Word was being preached and you knew that all of God’s Word is with power, but it just didn’t seem to connect with you, something was missing? Usually when we get in that place, we assume that the problem must be something or someone around us. “Well, if that person wasn’t so expressive in worship, I could focus better. Well, if these people around me would worship more freely, then I could. Well, if the pastor preached differently then it could really move me to action. Well, if the music was this specific style, it would be more worshipful.” We can come up with all sorts of things, but the problem with all of them is that we are looking at all of the external factors and ignoring the internal factors, which is exactly what Satan wants us to do. As long as we are looking at others, possibly even blaming them, we are clueless to what is really going on in our own heart. We see this clearly in the people of Malachi’s day. Repeatedly we see God having to address things with the people and God literally says to them, “I say this.” Then the people say, “Who, me, God? What do you mean?” In other words, they knew something was missing, but they didn’t realize that the problem was themselves. In their case, they were certainly going through the outward motions of worship. They were checking off the spiritual checklist, but their heart wasn’t in it. They were going through the motions, but their actions were

not based upon a relationship with God that occurs when we love Him and want to give our best to Him. They thought everything was fine, but God has already shown them two things they have done. First, they brought Him worship by bringing their leftovers as a sacrifice to God. In fact, so pathetic is what they brought to God in worship, that God says, “You have despised My name.” Second, they disrespected by God by how they treated others. They dealt harmfully with their brothers and sisters and mistreated their spouse by divorcing them and marrying other people that God had spoken against. They were going through the motions of religion, but there was no relationship, and it disgusted God. Today, we come to the third hidden sin. Just like last week, it is likely one that will hit close to home, but, again, we don’t need to change God’s Word. We need to humble ourselves and yield to His Word so that our lives are changed for His glory.

SHOW TEXT

I realize today that this message will likely be uncomfortable for some. I remember early on in ministry that an older pastor wisely told me that the most uncomfortable sermons he ever preached were on the Biblical perspective of marriage and money. I asked him why they were so uncomfortable, and he quickly explained that it was because people got madder about those subjects than most because their lives are usually so very different than the teaching and standards of Scripture. Over the past 16 years of ministry I have found that to be very true, but I remind you that God’s Word speaks into these things for a reason. If God is God, then He is God and I am not. It is not my place to change His Word, but to let His Word change me. God has much to say in this passage that still speaks powerfully today. It will make most of us uncomfortable, to some extent, but as long as God draws us closer to Him, I praise Him for it. I want us to see three key truths from the text this morning:

I. A Serious Indictment (vs. 8)

Nobody likes to hear bad news. None of us go to the doctor wanting to have our world rocked by a bad report. We prefer to hear good news, that all is well. However, there are times that a doctor has to look us in the eyes and tell us the hard stuff. It may be that we are very unhealthy, our heart isn’t in good shape, that we have some very concerning symptoms, that our blood levels seem off, etc. There can be a great number of problems that we face physically. While none of us want to hear that, if something is truly wrong, we definitely want to hear about it. We don’t want to be ignorant of reality. We need to know the problem so that we can make some changes, so that we can get healthy and be well. When there is something bad to diagnose, we can’t afford to ignore it, put it off, and keep doing what we’re doing. It is time to hear it, get honest with ourselves about it, and then start taking steps that will lead to change and to health. This is true physically, but in many ways, it is also true spiritually. If there are harmful things in our life or if we are going the wrong direction, we need to know. Such was the case with God’s people in Malachi 3.

God starts off with a simple question: Will a man rob God? The question seems strange doesn’t it? Can a man literally rob God? Some would rationalize, “If God owns everything, then how can somebody rob God.” The Bible says clearly in **Psalm 24:1**, “The earth is the Lord’s, and all it contains, the world, and those who dwell in it.” It is true that everything belongs to God. However, that doesn’t mean that He holds it all tightly with His fist closed. In fact, on the contrary, God in

His grace and mercy provides us with all that we need to live and honor Him. You may think, “But, I have a job and I work hard for the money that I have.” That may be true, but Who has given you the ability to do that job? Who has given you the mind and the skills that you have? Who has opened the door for your opportunities? Some might claim the credit, but how do you explain when some doors close while others open without the sovereign hand of God? Yes, you may work hard, and might prove your value and loyalty over time, but it is ultimately God’s hand that allows you to have favor and income and blessing. In other words, God owns everything, but He graciously entrusts portions of His vast resources into our hands for us to steward for His purposes. He did this all the way back in the Garden of Eden with Adam and Eve. God made the Garden. He owned it all, yet He gave Adam and Eve dominion, authority, and responsibility over it to manage it for God’s glory and even for their good. In the same way, it is still God who gives the opportunity and ability to work and the provisions that come as a result of that work.

A. God’s Desire

What are we to do with the provisions that God gives us? It is a wonderful blessing to be given various resources and provisions by God, but with this blessing comes great responsibility. God refers to this responsibility at the end of verse 8 with two words, “tithes and offerings.” As it has often been explained, a “tithes” literally means “a tenth.” This is not a metaphor, a typology, or an illustration. To give a “tithes” literally means to give a “tenth”. Then there are also “offerings”, which is anything offered above the initial gift. It is right and it is reasonable to understand that the One who gives every blessing would desire that we would honor Him first with all that we receive.

It is interesting to note that the idea of tithes and offerings have been around for a very long time. Even before the Mosaic Law was established, we see tithing practiced as an act of faith, trust, and worship. In Genesis 14:20 and in Hebrews 7, we learn that Abraham paid a tithe, a tenth, to Melchizedek, who was a representative of God. Abraham understood that the blessings, the victories, and the resources all came from God, so in faith and in worship he offered a tithe back to God. We also see this practiced by Jacob in Genesis 28:22. Tithing wasn’t just a historical or traditional practice, it was also something that God instituted in the Law of Moses, 400 years later, as part of Israel’s worship. In that day, this was not something that God merely desired, but something He demanded. Leviticus 27, Numbers 18, and Deuteronomy 14 all explain this. As an act of praise and worship the Israelites brought the first tenth of all their crops and all their cattle, and they gave it as tithes and offerings to the Lord. Now, it is important for us to understand that they didn’t just give 10 percent. They did give that in their first tithe, but that was just the beginning. According to the Mosaic Law, they actually gave three different tithes – one for the temple with its worship and ministries, one for the Levites, and one for the poor in the land (which they gave every three years). Through these tithes and offerings, the people were expressing their gratitude to God for His abundant blessings, but they were also supporting the ministry that occurred in the temple, the ministers who provided that service and the needs of those who came to be helped. When you add all of this up, over a three-year period they were giving about 23.3% of their annual income towards the work of the Lord.

As you might imagine, this requirement revealed two common problems with how people responded to tithing, and frankly, we still deal with these today. The first is that many of the Jews became legalists who obeyed the Law and even added to it to make sure that they were “right” with God. They often thought that their outward obedience would earn God’s righteousness. So, they gave much and let everybody know about it. The second problem was equally common, which is that many neglected giving the tithe to God. They likely reasoned that they didn’t have much to give. They concluded that times were too hard to honor God first. They excused themselves and justified their lack of action, but by doing this they were disobeying God, depriving the ministry in the temple that needed those resources to continue, and denying God the opportunity to fulfill His promise.

I say this as “God’s Desire” because I believe wholeheartedly that God still wants His people to be a generous, giving people. Some will say that a “tithe” is not for today because it isn’t addressed in the New Testament. However, Jesus did address in Matthew 23 and Luke 11. In **Luke 11:42** for example Jesus said this, “But woe to you Pharisees! For you pay tithe of mint and rue and every kind of garden herb, and yet disregard justice and the love of God; but these are things you should have done without neglecting the others.” In other words, Jesus was saying to them, “You should certainly continue to give your tithe, but you should also make sure that your heart is in it and that you love God.” Regardless of how you feel about a “tithe” God makes it very clear that those who genuinely love Him should be a generous, giving people. Not only does it demonstrate our gratitude and devotion to God, it also helps to accomplish His work. I love the way this is summarized in **2 Corinthians 9:7-13 (Show Text)**. Notice verse 13, “Because of the proof given by this ministry (generous giving), they will glorify God for your obedience to your confession of the gospel of Christ and for the liberality of your contribution to them and to all.” In other words, God desires that we recognize that all resources come from Him and He allows us to steward them for His glory. What an amazing invitation! So, as we give to the Lord’s work, He uses it so that worship is established, His work is furthered, our witness is effective, and as a means to continually provide for us. Believers, we should choose to give because He is worthy of our best and we want to honor Him first with all that He entrusts to us. So, let’s decide to give not with a begrudging, complaining spirit or by means of force or manipulation. Let’s give because we love God and we see the eternal value in giving our best to Him. **Warren Wiersbe** said it best, “Since God made and own everything, He doesn’t need anything that we can bring Him. But when we obey His Word and bring our gifts as an act of worship with grateful hearts, it pleases Him.”

B. Man’s Denial

Here comes the indictment. God says, “You are robbing Me.” Notice this was not past tense, that this was some previous wrong. They were still in the act of robbing God, and God wouldn’t let it stay hidden. God called them out on it, but instead of receiving it and repenting of their sin, they challenged God. So far, every time God addressed something with them in this book, they talked back to Him and argued. They acted like a spoiled, rebellious child who refused to obey their Father. They said, “Oh yeah, how have we

robbed from You?” In other words, they looked at their actions and justified themselves. They thought they were fine. Why would they feel that way? I think that there are many things that caused them to be deceived. First, they were religious. They had done many good works in their life. They had built the temple and the city walls and did so supposedly for God. Not only that, they even went to the temple to supposedly worship God and even brought sacrifices and offerings. It becomes clear from the text that they at least brought a portion of their grain as an offering, and even brought some of their animals. In other words, they justified their actions because they did some religious works. After all, they weren't as bad as the people who didn't know God. They didn't live like the heathen nations around them. They didn't commit all these hideous acts. They didn't forget God entirely. After all, they were religious. Sure, they only brought their diseased animals as an offering, and sure, they only brought a small portion of the grain, but at least they brought something. This was more than the pagan people brought to God. This was their reasoning. These were the lies they told themselves to excuse their actions, but God looked through it all and said it plainly, “You are robbing Me.” Their denial could in no way minimize God's emphatic declaration. No excuse would ever change God's indictment.

II. **A Sobering Ignorance (vs. 9-12)**

It is clear the people were ignorant of reality by how they questioned God, but it is also clear that they were ignorant because of what they couldn't see. Why do people often not give to God? Perhaps because they feel they can't afford to, perhaps they feel that they don't have any “extra”, Perhaps they feel that God doesn't really need it anyway. There are many things that might hinder us from giving, but the issue is not about whether or not God needs it. The truth is that we need the act of giving as a way of worshipping God and demonstrating His authority and our appreciation for Who He is and what He's done. The people in Malachi's day didn't get that. All they could see is what they would lose by giving to God, without realizing how their disobedience was already robbing them. Remember, the cost of disobedience is always far greater the cost of obedience. They didn't realize that their lack of blessing was a consequence of their own disobedience and that if they would obey God first, He would take care of the rest. In other words, robbing God always robs from us as well. We see this in three specific ways.

A. **Their robbery hindered their work**

Notice verse 9 says, “You are cursed with a curse.” This might sound harsh, but this is exactly what God had warned them of. **Deuteronomy 11:26-28** says, “See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse: the blessing, if you listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, which I am commanding you today; and the curse, if you do not listen to the commandments of the LORD your God, but turn aside from the way which I am commanding you today, by following other gods which you have not known.” In fact, God said specifically in Deuteronomy 28:33 that one of the judgments would be found in the way that their crops would be limited and ruined. Now look at verse 10. There was no food in the temple. Now look at verse 11. There was a “devourer” that was destroying the fruit and the crops and even the grapes. Insects had invaded the land and the grain and fruit were not maturing. This meant a loss of resources and a loss of food. Sadly, this means that they still hadn't learned their lesson. 100 years earlier they had faced this very thing. Listen

to what God said to the people of Haggai's day in **Haggai 1:5-7, 9-11**, "Now therefore, thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways! 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.' Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Consider your ways!' '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. Therefore, because of you the sky has withheld its dew and the earth has withheld its produce. 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.'" Their robbing God greatly hindered their work and their fruitfulness in it. They were working in vain and had nothing to show for their labor because they had neglected to honor God first. Could this be the reason why you are spinning your wheels at work? Why you don't have clarity or direction? Could this be the reason that you have very little to show for all of your effort?

B. Their robbery hindered their worship

Obviously, their robbery hindered their worship. They were giving God the leftovers. They gave Him the leftovers over their sacrifices, the leftovers of their time, the leftovers of their tithes, the leftovers of their time, the leftovers of themselves. They didn't give God first of anything. This led to half-hearted actions, dead religion, an empty temple, and a disrespected Father. Their worship had become so messed up that God had to say, "Shut down the service so that you can no longer worship Me in this way. I am not pleased with you and I will not accept this." Could this be why things feel "off" for you in worship? Could this be why others around you seem so close to the Lord, yet you feel so distant? Could this be why you wonder if your prayers are being heard? Could this be why you are just going through the motions? This is why when we are giving in our weekly worship services, we are often reminded that our giving isn't simply an act of tradition or routine, it is an act of worship. It is a simple way of honoring God and demonstrating His Lordship in our lives. Jesus said it well in **Matthew 6:24**, "No one can serve two masters; for either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth." Generous giving is a practical way of demonstrating that wealth isn't our god and that we aren't our own god doing whatever we want to do.

C. Their robbery hindered their witness

We see from verse 12 that something else was greatly lacking because of their robbery. Do you remember what God promised Abraham in **Genesis 26:4**? He said, "I will multiply your descendants as the stars of heaven, and will give your descendants all these lands; and by your descendants all the nations of the earth shall be blessed." This would be done initially as God's people would be a witness to the ancient world that there is no God like Jehovah God. There is no God like the Almighty God Who made the heavens and the earth. The Jews were to be a holy people, set apart to God and for God so that they might point others to Him. However, by minimizing God's worth in their life, they treated Him with disrespect and with disdain. In fact, we see from chapter 1, that they treated their governors

and officials with greater care and respect than they treated God Himself. Little did they realize, this greatly robbed them of their opportunity to be a witness for God. Had they trusted the Lord, He would have done great things for them and they would have had a great testimony to others, but as it was, they were floundering in their faith and nobody could call them blessed. In this case, without their giving, how would they bless the nations around them. Without worshiping God with their best, their testimony would lack power. Can you imagine the thought of them telling others about the true God, while at the same time, through their giving, they demonstrate that they don't even worship Him as the true God? Sadly, many of the unbelievers gave more of themselves to their false gods than the Jewish people gave to the true God. This greatly hindered their witness. Could it be the same in our own lives today? We pray, "God save the masses," but what are we willing to give towards that goal? We pray, "God draw my neighbor to Yourself," but are we willing to go share the gospel? We pray, "God help the missionaries in the world," but are we willing to sacrifice our Starbucks run in order that we can be a blessing? We pray, "God, save the children in this community, help our young people" but are we willing to be stretched out of our comfort zone where we give sacrificially?

III. A Simple Invitation (vs. 10-12)

God has exposed the problem that lies beneath the surface. God has revealed how their robbery was actually robbing Him, robbing themselves from His blessing and robbing others of their opportunity. We close today with a word of invitation. God calls them to do something and then He does something in return.

A. The Proposal of the Lord

God says, "Bring the WHOLE tithe into the storehouse." Don't bring the leftovers. Don't bring what is convenient. It is obvious from the book of Malachi, that the people gave little and complained about what they did give. They were like Ananias and Saphira in Acts 5, who brought something to God, but they kept back a portion for themselves, convincing themselves that they couldn't give anything more. God said, "Stop bringing your halfhearted gifts to Me, bring the whole tithe into the storehouse." Notice, though, that God doesn't stop there. He continues on and says, "Test me NOW in this." It is interesting to realize that this is the only time in all of the Bible where God invites us to test Him. The word for "test" means "to prove." God is calling His people to give first to Him and to watch Him prove what He will do. This requires one key ingredient – Faith. This is what Elijah was doing in 1 Kings 17 when he met the widow of Zarephath. Verse 13 tells us that he called her to "Make a little cake first, and then prove me whether there will not be enough afterwards for you and your son." She had to decide, "Do I believe in the God of Elijah? Do I trust that He will provide for me?" The question of our giving really isn't about the amount or about what is comfortable or uncomfortable. It's really a matter of worship and trust. Are we committed to worshiping God with our best and are we willing to trust His Word?

B. The Promise of the Lord

God says, “Test Me now in this, if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.” This would have greatly encouraged them. They had seen the result of the heavens being shut up. Now, God says, “Honor Me by giving your tithes and offerings and I will open the windows of heaven and pour out the blessings. I will rebuke the devourer for you, and I will make you a witness to the nations around you.” God was showing them that if they would faithfully obey Him, they would see that He faithfully keeps His promises. Please understand that when God promises blessings, He is not saying you are going to be physically rich and healthy and all your wildest dreams are going to come true. Our blessings are not measured in temporary monetary value that will one day perish, but in spiritual blessings that will last for eternity. As we honor God through our giving, He continually meets our needs and provides us with more opportunities to give. I like the way that Warren Wiersbe summarized this passage of Scripture: “Whenever we rob God, we always rob ourselves of the spiritual blessings that always accompany obedience and faithful giving. But even more, the money that rightfully belongs to God that we keep for ourselves never stays with us. It ends up going to the doctor, the auto body shop, or the tax collector. If we don’t trust God to provide for us, whatever we do trust will prove futile. People who lovingly give tithes and offerings to God find that whatever is left over goes much farther and brings much greater blessing.” Yes, giving is definitely an act of faith, but it is one that God rewards time and time again when it is given for His glory and the good of others.

Friend, never underestimate the eternal difference that is made when we give of our time, talents and treasures for the glory of God and the good of others.

Maybe you are wondering, “Pastor, where do I begin? What should I do first? What should I give first?” Remember, what is the key verse to this entire book? It is Malachi 3:7 where God says, “Return to Me, and I will return to you.” We get right today, not by a bunch of religious works, or giving a large gift. We must first return to the Lord. We must first be restored in our relationship with Him. He is interested in our lives being surrendered completely to Him. Once this occurs, our worship and our giving will be pleasing to Him, because we will bring our best with a heart to show our praise and gratitude to Him.