

**Intro:** "It was a summer day (in 1947) and Muhammad was tending flocks east of Bethlehem. While chasing a stray goat among the high, steep cliffs along the Dead Sea's west shore, he noticed several caves, one with a dark mouth only large enough for a man to crawl through. Faced with a temptation few boys could resist, Muhammad found a rock and threw it toward the cave. His aim was good and the stone disappeared into the darkness. But instead of hearing the expected dull thump, the crackling sound of breaking pottery echoed from the chamber.

"The boy investigated the cave and found it loaded with tall, cylinder-shaped jars. He had seen enough. He fled, later confiding his story to a close friend. Together they returned to the cave and squeezed in for a closer look. The large pottery vessels stood in two rows. They were the common variety used in ancient times to carry and cool water, store grain, fruit oils, and transport hot coals. However the vessels Muhammad now examined weren't storing food--only wads of linen and leather scrolls written in a language he could not read.

"The boy kept three of the scrolls but had only a superficial interest in them. Unconvinced of his new possession's value, he continued shepherding, often carrying the leather scrolls with him as he roamed with his sheep, much like a child carries a favorite toy. A local cobbler briefly considered buying the leather--apparently he was on the lookout for raw materials from which to make shoes.

"Thankfully Muhammad's scrolls didn't remain secret for long. News of his find spread, investigations followed, and the historical, educational, and religious communities were stunned by what they discovered. The young shepherd boy had unwittingly stumbled onto the oldest Bible manuscripts ever found, dating back a hundred years before Christ. His priceless treasure we know today as the Dead Sea scrolls." (story by John MacArthur, "Grace to You" letter, 11/15/94)

John MacArthur made this observation, "How ironic that this young bedouin continued to live in relative poverty after making one of modern history's most significant archaeological finds, not realizing the full value of his possession."

Yet many Christians do the same today. We have a vast treasure in our possession, the Word of God, but we fail to take full advantage of its lifechanging truth. We ignore spiritual truth to our own detriment. Especially in one area, an area we will learn about this morning from Malachi 3.

Have you ever robbed God? You say, "How could I possibly rob God? I can't even see Him, and I've never taken anything that belonged to Him." But wait. There's more than one way to rob someone. One is to take something that belongs to him. Yet another is to withhold from someone what is due to him.

Malachi's people were guilty of a great crime. They robbed God. It's a crime committed by Christians today as well.

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\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

**Proposition: In Malachi 3:6-12, Malachi confronts two problem-areas in the lives of God's people, areas in which they were robbing God, and short-changing themselves.**

- I. Problem Area #1: They robbed God in their Living (6-7).
  - A. God revealed their Crime (6-7a).
  - B. God revealed His Challenge (7b).
- II. Problem Area #2: They robbed God in their Giving (8-12).
  - A. God revealed their Crime (8-9).
  - B. God revealed His Challenge (10-12).
    - 1. Bring the whole tithe.
    - 2. Test Me.
    - 3. Look out!

Implications: 5 guidelines we must keep in mind when giving...

- 1. All I have is God's.
- 2. God privileges me to give Him the firstfruits.
- 3. Giving is a means of worship, not a business deal.
- 4. God is just as concerned with what I keep as what I give.
- 5. I can never outgive God.

**I. Problem Area #1: They robbed God in their Living (6-7).**

Malachi, a 5th century B.C. prophet, has already confronted the people of Israel for their waywardness. In ch 1 he condemned the priests for their faulty worship and flippant handling of the Word of God. In ch 2, he rebuked the people for their covenant violations, namely their casual attitude towards marriage and divorce.

Their living was out of whack. Yet they had the audacity to blame God! They asked in 2:17, "Where is the God of justice?" So Malachi told them in 3:1-5, "You'll see the God of justice! He is going to send the Messiah. He is going to inaugurate the Day of the LORD.

After revealing His future activity in vv 1-5, God revealed two matters that pertained to the present in vv 6-7.

A. God revealed their Crime (6-7a).

What was their crime? They deviated from God's decrees. Notice vv 6-7, "For I am the LORD...Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them." We rob God in our living when we stop keeping the commands He has given us in His Word. Disobedience is robbing God.

Why is it that God doesn't obliterate His people instantly when they sin? He tells us in v 6, "For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed." God is immutable. He doesn't change. He's the same today as He was in Adam's day, and will be when He establishes the new creation. He is faithful--faithful to Himself, faithful to His covenant promises. Even when His people fail, He will not (see 2 Tim 2:11-13).

Not that He hasn't had reason to consume His people. V 7 "Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances and have not kept them." God

had had ample reason to destroy Israel! Ten centuries of "turning away" by the forefathers. A spiritual roller coaster ride that had lasted more than a thousand years. God watched as apostates like Saul and Ahab and Manasseh and Jehoiakim led His chosen people in willful disobedience to His commands. Though He judged them, He did not obliterate them.

In fact, just the opposite. Time and time again, He extended to them the same invitation, the same challenge we see in v 7.

#### B. God revealed His Challenge (7b).

God challenged His people (7), "Return to Me, and I will return to you, saith the LORD of hosts." Notice the God's challenge contains both an invitation ("Return") and a promise ("And I will return"). God's challenge is clear. His people needed to return to Him, to do a 180 degree about face, to leave their life of sin, and follow Him.

A hundred years earlier, God beckoned His stubborn people with similar words through Zechariah (1:3), "Thus saith the LORD of hosts, Turn unto Me...and I will turn unto you." Three centuries prior, through the prophet Isaiah, God gave a comparable invitation (Isa 1:18), "Come now, and let us reason together, saith the LORD; though your sins be as scarlet, they shall be white as snow; though they be red like crimson, they shall be as wool."

Do you know what that says to us about our God? No one is too far gone for God. He is longsuffering, not willing that any should perish. He desires for all to repent and return to Him through Christ (2 Pt 3:9).

But do you know how a lot of people respond to such an invitation? The same way the Israelites did--with self-sufficient, self-righteous denial. Listen to their reaction to God's invitation in v 7, "Be ye said, In what way shall we return?" In the words of the LB, "We have never even gone away!"

Pews are full of people this morning who are hearing the invitation of God, and their response is, "Who me, repent? Why do I need to repent? I'm not that bad of a person. Why would I need to change?" It's hard to help someone who won't admit they need help. In order to be saved, we must admit we are lost.

Malachi's people wouldn't admit that they had a problem. They couldn't see that they were robbing God in their living. So guess what God did? He became more specific, and confronted a second problem area. What was it?

## **II. Problem Area #2: They robbed God in their Giving (8-12).**

V 8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me. But ye say, How have we robbed Thee? In tithes and offerings."

Is giving really important? Yes! Granted, there has been much abuse in our day. We're all too familiar with the scandals--Limousines and mansions funded by slick, smooth-talking, tear-jerking preachers. Though the abuse is there, we must not forget that the Bible has much to say about giving. This was problem area #2 for the Israelites. And frankly, it's a problem area for some of us. We are robbing God with our giving. How does it happen?

#### A. God revealed their Crime (8-9).

God says bluntly (8), "You have robbed Me." This is a rare verb (it appears elsewhere only in Pr 22:23). It can mean "to take forcibly (Baldwin, 245-6). The people were taking what belonged to God. They were ripping God off. They were thieves. How did they do it? That's what they wanted to know. "How have we robbed thee (8)?" God answered (8), "In tithes and offerings."

God has always asked His people to give. Not because He lacks or needs anything. Giving to God is a privilege. Giving is an expression of devotion and worship. Cain and Able worshiped God by bringing gifts to Him. Abraham gave the priest Melchizekek a "tenth" of the plunder he obtained in rescuing Lot (Gen 14:20). In the New Testament, we are told (2 Cor 9:7), "Every man according as he purposes in his heart, so let him give, not grudgingly, or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver."

In the Mosaic Law, there were special instructions about giving. God commanded His people to give Him both "tithes and offerings." A tithe was a tenth of their income. He instructed in Lev 27:30, "And all the tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land, or of the fruit of the tree, is the LORD's: it is holy unto the LORD." The tithe was given to the Levites, since the Levites had no land of their own (Num 18:21). Normally, the tithe was brought to the sanctuary in Jerusalem (Dt 14:22-27). Every third year, however, people were to give their tithes in the town where they lived, and it was to be used for the Levites, aliens, orphans, and widows (Dt 14:29). If you didn't tithe, you were oppressing the poor (see 3:5; Wolf, 107).

An "offering" is closely related to a "tithe." The Levites were required to give a "tithe of a tithe" to the priests as an "offering" (Num 18:26-29). There were different types of offerings--some were required and some voluntary.

But in Malachi's day, the people were committing a great crime. They were stingy in their giving. They robbed God of the tithes and offerings due to Him. And stingy giving leads to frustrated living. See v 9, "Ye are cursed with a curse; for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation." When we rob God, we're really robbing ourselves. By the way, stingy giving is an indicator of spiritual density (Kaiser, 90). If it grates me to give to God, then I have a spiritual problem.

A word of caution. We don't obligate God by giving. We should never view giving as a way to manipulate God. Material blessings are not necessarily a sign of God's favor (at times, even the wicked prosper). But having said that, we must hasten to say this. Many Christians go from one squeeze to another because they rob God in their giving. The paycheck never seems to go far enough. But when we choose to honor God by giving Him the firstfruits, it's amazing to watch how He "stretches" what's left!

If you've never really learned how to give, you may be thinking, "This talk about sacrificial giving doesn't make sense to me. I'm a facts-and-figures person. I need things in black and white." What God says next is for you.

## B. God revealed His Challenge (10-12).

It's an amazing challenge. God invited His people to take three steps.

### *1. Bring the whole tithe.*

V 10 "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in mine house." The NIV says, "Bring the whole tithe." Our society operates by cash (and credit). Israel was an agricultural nation. Their tithes and offerings were often in the form of crops and animals which were brought to the temple storehouse (treasury). God wanted the "whole" tithe. That includes both the gift and the giver.

Listen. If you drop a wad of bills in the offering plate, but you refuse to give God your life, God's not impressed.

### 2. *Test Me.*

V 10 "And test Me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts." The word "test" appears 32 times in the Old Testament. Usually, God is the subject (He tests His people). But here He invites His people to test Him. It's an invitation to live by faith.

Actually, that's what giving is, an act of faith. When we choose to give to God (what we may think we can't "afford" to give), we're saying, "Lord, I'll put You first in my life, and watch what You do to take care of the needs in my life." Jesus said this is the heart of kingdom living, "But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and all these things shall be added unto you (Mt 6:33)."

Which leads to step #3. God says, "Bring the whole tithe, test Me, and..."

### 3. *Look out!*

V 10 "Test Me...if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it." What an offer! God says, "Give to Me, and you won't be able to contain what I give to you in return!"

What are the benefits of giving? I see four mentioned here.

Benefit #1--Provision. When we give, God meets our needs (10). David shared his personal experience in Ps 37:25, "I have been young, and now am old; yet have I not seen the righteous forsaken, nor his seed begging bread."

Benefit #2--Presence. When we give, God's presence becomes more real in our lives. V 10 says that giving invites God to get involved in our lives, "I will open FOR YOU the windows of heaven, and pour out FOR YOU a blessing."

Benefit #3--Protection. When we give, God promises to protect us from calamity, and guarantees He will take care of us. V 11 "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes..."

Benefit #4--Publicity. V 12 points out an interesting side-effect of giving, "And all nations shall call you blessed; for ye shall be a delightsome land." When God's people give by faith, and God blesses them, God gets good "publicity." The world can't help but see it. Giving is a good testimony to the world.

There's a story told about a missionary who saw a Hindu woman who had two sons, one healthy and the other sickly. The mother sacrificed her healthy son to the crocodiles, and kept the sickly child. When asked why, she responded, "Sir, we always give our best to our gods." What will it take if we are to honor God in our giving?

## **Implications: 5 guidelines we must keep in mind when giving...**

### 1. All I have is God's.

We must never forget that all we have came from God. And if we are disciples of Christ, He is our Master, Lord, and Owner. Someone may object, "But we don't

live under the Law, like Malachi did." Hans Brandenburg is right when he says the Law is a shadow of what was to come in Christ (Verhoef, 311), "The Law declares one day out of seven to be holy unto the Lord, the Spirit sanctifies all seven of them. The law sets apart one tribe out of twelve to be priests, the Spirit declares that the whole congregation has to fulfill the priestly office. The law demands a tenth part of his people's possessions, the Spirit translates us to become God's possession with all that we have. Everything belongs to Him."

#### 2. God privileges me to give Him the firstfruits.

The principle is given in Pr 3:9-10, "Honor the Lord with thy substance, and with the first fruits of all thine increase. So shall thy barns be filled with plenty, and thy presses shall burst out with new wine." Practically speaking, what does that mean? God isn't honored when we get our paycheck, stick it in the checking account, spend it all week on ourselves, and then give Him what's left on Sunday (if there IS anything left). He is honored when we set aside the "firstfruits" of our income. That goes for all of us. Even children need to be taught how to give, and that giving is a privilege.

#### 3. Giving is a means of worship, not a business deal.

I heard a news report this past week about a proposal to change the tax guidelines. What caught my ear was the response of one opponent. He said if people don't get tax credit, they won't give to charity. My friends, there may be tax breaks to be gained from giving, but if that's our motivation, we're no better than the people in Malachi's day. Giving is a means of worship.

#### 4. God is just as concerned with what I keep as what I give.

God doesn't say, "Give Me 10% and do whatever you like with the rest." Not at all. We are God's stewards. He's just as interested that we use what we DON'T give for His honor. When you drop your offering in the plate, resolve to honor Him with the rest.

#### 5. I can never outgive God.

Perhaps you're thinking, "I've never given sacrificially to God. I'm afraid to start now. What will happen? I can hardly make it from paycheck to paycheck."

An Arab chief tells the story (in Leadership Journal, told by Don McCullough) of a spy captured and sentenced to death by a general in the Persian army. This general had the strange custom of giving condemned criminals a choice between the firing squad and 'the big, black door.' The moment for execution drew near, and guards brought the spy to the Persian general. "What will it be," asked the general, "the firing squad or the 'big, black door?'" The spy hesitated for a long time. Finally he chose the firing squad. A few minutes later, hearing shots ring out confirming the spy's execution, the general turned to his aide and said, "They always prefer the known to the unknown. People fear what they don't know. Yet, we gave him a choice." The aide asked, "What lies beyond the big door?" "Freedom," replied the general. "I've known only a few brave enough to take the door."

If you fear the unknown when it comes to giving (or any other area), trust God. Take Him at His Word. Resolve today to obey Him. Make a decision this moment that you will not rob God, but will honor Him with your living and your giving.