

Rob God or receive his rich blessings

19/4/30 dkm

Read: Malachi 3:6-18, 2Corinthians 9

Text: Malachi 3:6-12

Psalms: 37:23-27, 50:7-15, 78:18-28, 72old

In my younger days I loved playing cricket. I played all during my school days. At university I was invited to join a church-based cricket team. We played on Saturday afternoon. After the match many of the players went to church. I learned that by going to church Saturday night they were free to do what they liked on Sunday- for some it was more sport. This way of worship reminds me of the way people were worshipping in the days of Malachi. They were going through the motions but their hearts were far from God. They were eager to get through the worship service, or Mass as the case may be, in order to get back to their business or their pleasures (Amos 8:5). The people in the days of Malachi were so ignorant and irreverent they were bringing sick and lame animals for sacrifice. They were also ignoring God's commands regarding marriage, and regarding the tithe.

Malachi was prophesying to the post-exilic community around the time of Nehemiah. Nehemiah was a reformer, as well a wall-builder. After Ezra read the Book of the Law to all the people, Nehemiah set about implementing religious reforms. What was the focus of these reforms? There were three: the Sabbath day, the tithe, and marriage (Neh 10:28-39, 13:10-31). Malachi dealt with marriage in the previous chapter, and now he deals with the tithe. Marriage, as we saw, is a creation ordinance confirmed in the Mosaic covenant. Many are surprised that the Sabbath also belongs to the time of creation (Gen 2:1-3), and was actually in force before being legislated in the Ten Commandments. You may be surprised that the tithe also predates the giving of the law through Moses. The tithe goes back to Abraham, the father of the faithful (Rom 4:11), to the time when Abraham gave the king of Salem, and priest of the Most High God, a tithe of all he had (Gen 14:20).

In many churches you will be told that under the new covenant the tithe and the Sabbath day are no longer commanded. Some go so far as to say that marriage is no longer commanded either; are such persons being consistent, even if they are false teachers? Marriage in the Lord is important because God desires 'godly offspring' (2:15). The Sabbath and the tithe are important because God desires people who trust him as the giver of every good and perfect gift: 'Every good gift and every perfect gift is from above, and comes down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow of turning' (James 1:17). Let us look at the words spoken by Malachi under three subheadings: 'Return to me', 'Robbing God', and 'Rich blessings'.

1. Return to me

Before the exile, prophets like Jeremiah pleaded with the people to return to the Lord (Jer 3:12-14, Isa 44:22). After the exiles came back to Jerusalem the prophets were again pleading for the people to return to the Lord (3:7, Zech 1:3). Their initial enthusiasm and commitment to the Lord had grown cold. The priests and the people had turned away from the Lord to follow the lusts of their own hearts, and the ways of the heathen around them. The Lord accused them of going away from his ordinances and failing to keep his commands (3:7).

This had been the pattern among the people since the days of their fathers, and it continues as the pattern today. I belong to a generation that turned away from the Lord on mass, the generation of post-war 'baby-boomers' that enjoyed the good life like no other. One journalist says that this 'godless generation' in which we live is the 'product of prosperity'. It was not Phillip Adams because he is one of the godless ones! Is it any wonder that their children are also godless; they were not taught anything from the Bible, apart from jokes and blasphemies.

Yet God in his mercy gives each one the opportunity to repent and return to him. In the days of the prophets God sent drought and disease as a wakeup call to a deaf generation. Can he not do the same today; is he not doing the same as thousands die from a pandemic sweeping across the world? Malachi called for the people to return to the Lord, and Jesus does the same: Repent and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ 'that your sins may be blotted out, so that times of refreshing may come from the presence of the Lord' (Acts 3:19).

We just heard from the book of James that the Lord does not change (James 1:17). Malachi says the same thing in one of the key verses in this prophecy: 'For I am the Lord, I do not change' (3:6). The people were accusing God of being unjust in prospering the wicked (2:17, 3:15). The baby-boomer generation saw the crowds following rock bands, film stars and sports stars, and thought they were missing out by going to church. Still today we see the wicked becoming rich and famous. Why am I resting on the Sabbath day, and tithing my income, when others are working two jobs and getting rich; maybe some call their superannuation their tithe. With the current pestilence the rich are no longer as rich as they thought; and they are more worried about death than their riches. They thought change always meant more treasure and pleasure, but we are seeing a different type of change today.

The world has been changing since the time of Adam and Eve. The human heart has not changed but human society has changed, often at a rapid pace, and sometimes for the better. But in all this change God has not changed (3:6, Numb 23:19). Why should He? He is already perfect! If God was not perfect he would not be God, and being perfect he cannot change for the better. God's word does not change and nor do his judgments. God is unchanging, especially in his faithfulness, which is why he did not cast off his people but called upon them to repent.

The sons of Jacob should have been thankful that God does not change because if he did he would have consumed them (3:6). They were angering the Lord by their wicked ways with regard to worship and marriage and, as now learn, their tithes and offerings (3:8). Their rebellion made God angry, and in righteous anger he could have destroyed them. But God remembered his promises, his promise to Abraham that through his descendants all the nations would be blessed, and his promise to David that from his line would come Messiah. Presumption is foolish and blaming God culpable. Even so, God is gracious; God is patient not wanting you or anyone to perish. He wants you to repent, to turn to God and trust in him, trust in him with all you are and all you have.

2. Robbing God

Does God need your money? Does God need the tithes and offerings you bring to him? No! God is the maker of this earth and everything in it. God owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps 50:10). You bring your tithe to the Lord to honour his holy name. You bring your offering to the Lord by way of thankfulness for his mercies. An offering out of poverty reflects a heart that is close to the Lord (Luke 21:1-4, 2Cor 8:3). Our offering is a measure of our trust in the Lord. This is why the prophet addresses this matter of tithes and offerings.

When told by the Lord to return to him, the people again responded with an irreverent 'How' question: 'How are we to return?' (3:7). We might have answered them saying, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul and all your mind', and they might have said, 'But we do love the Lord'. God looks on the heart and knows that out of the heart proceed actions, as well as words (Mat 15:19). These people's action, or lack thereof, regarding the tithe showed what was in their hearts. The Lord's answer to their impertinent question was to accuse them of robbing God (3:8). Again they respond, 'How have we robbed you?' It is foolish and dangerous to argue with God, as the Pharisees and Sadducees found out when questioning Jesus.

These Jews asked God how they were robbing him and they were told; they were silenced.

The Lord accused the exiles of robbing him 'in tithes and offerings' (3:8). Abraham was the first to give a tithe or a tenth of all he had to the Lord. In the Law of Moses tithing was commanded because the tribe of Levi, who served in the sanctuary of the Lord, was not given any land to cultivate- the tithe was also to help widows and orphans in the land (Deut 14:22-29). They were to tithe of their grain, wine and oil. The firstborn of their flocks belonged to the Lord. These things were brought to the storehouse in the temple. The Levite in turn gave a tenth to the Aaronic priests (Neh 10:37-39). The people had promised not to 'neglect the house of our God' (Neh 10:39) but this promise was obviously forgotten when Malachi spoke to them.

How could God accuse them of robbery when they had not stolen anything? If failure to pay workers their wage is robbery, as it is (Deut 24:15, James 5:4), then failure to give to the Lord what is rightfully his is also robbery. Everything we have is because of the Lord's blessing, and all he asks for is a tenth. The wicked person says they have earned all that they have, but the godly person says the Lord has blessed them. We note the word 'offerings' in 'tithes and offerings'. The Jews brought more than a regular tithe; they also brought special offerings to the Lord. Recognising that all we have comes from the Lord, a tenth is a guide or a minimum of what we bring to the Lord, remembering the more you sow the more you reap (2Cor 8:3).

As missionaries we were supported by 'faith giving' of many people. I know a lady who went back to work and gave most of her salary in order to support our family on the mission field. And she will testify to this day how the Lord has richly blessed her and her family. "Try me now in this 'says the Lord of hosts" (3:10). By faith this lady did what she did. She first gave herself to the Lord, and then gave of her income to the Lord (2Cor 8:5). I am praising the Lord still today

because of her actions. Are people praising the Lord because of your 'faith giving'? The important thing is that the Lord sees your gift and your heart, and that he is powerful to bless you. God is no man's debtor. God loves a generous and a cheerful giver (2Cor 9:7).

3. Rich blessings

The laws of economics tell us that if we give a tenth of our income away we will have to live on just ninety percent, and if we give more away we will have even less to live on. But God's ways are higher than our ways, and his laws are different to the laws of economics. Remember God is powerful to bless, and listen to his promises. We are about to read one of God's most amazing promises: 'Test me in this ...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it' (3:10 NIV). Shall we read this promise again! Do you pray to a God who is able to flood you with blessings, material as well as spiritual, blessings greater than you can ask or imagine? Do you know people who have experienced such blessing? I do. Are you ready to test God in this matter of tithes and offerings? He is ready to richly reward you!

And how might the Lord bless you? Where do we start! Give you a job and keep you in it when many are unemployed or sick or injured. Give you food on the table each day. Give you a family and a fellowship. God does not promise you will never get sick or lose your job, but he does promise you will not be left destitute (Ps 37: 19, 25). For the Jews it was God's blessing upon their land: 'I will rebuke the devourer' (3:11). Locusts often devoured their crops; by controlling the rain God kept them from swarming. Rain at the right time also gave them a rich harvest. These promises are based on the covenant blessings and curses declared by Moses in Deuteronomy 28 (3:9). God is powerful to bless and powerful to withhold blessing. Which will it be for you?

Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God. By trusting God with all your possessions, and cheerfully giving to him the portion he asks for, you will know God's power to bless, and so will your neighbours. 'All the nations will call you blessed' (3:12). I once asked why some nations are rich and others poor. There was at the time a correlation between church (Protestant) attendance and prosperity. Today we are on the back-end of any such correlation because worship of the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ is giving way to the worship of idols, and God's blessings upon our land are drying up.