

Sterling Sermon Guide
Malachi: Are We Robbing God?
Moses Falco, October 8, 2017



MALACHI

How to use this guide

- The main purpose of this guide is to encourage groups and individuals to dig deeper into the topic of a sermon. This guide summarizes the sermon and provides discussion questions and suggestions of how to continue the conversation in order to apply the topic to real life.
- Listen to the sermon online (sterlingmennonite.ca) if you were not in church that Sunday or if you want to hear it again. If this sermon is not on the website, please contact our office.
- Re-read the scripture text and recommended reading.
- Select a leader in your group to guide your conversation and to lead you through this study.
- Use what is helpful for your group, but do not be bound by this guide. Let the Spirit lead you. You may be surprised where you end up.

Malachi: Are We Robbing God?
Part 2 of a 2-part series

Scripture Text: Malachi 3:6-12

Recommended Reading: Malachi (the whole book)

Prepare Your Heart: 2 Corinthians 9:6-7

Sermon Nugget: Malachi is a dialogue between God and Israel and in it we find accusations about a broken covenant. But God is innocent and it is Israel that has lost its passion for God. One of the accusations is that Israel is robbing God by not bringing their tithes to God. We often use this passage to enforce giving in the church for the church. But is this the right interpretation? As followers of Jesus in the New Covenant, we are called to put our faith in God. We are invited to trust Him. We are called to live in community and to care for those who have needs. We practice tithes and offerings not out of obligation, but as cheerful givers, out of trust in God and care for our communities.

Courtroom Accusations

The book of Malachi can be imagined as set in a court room, where God and Israel are discussing their covenant relationship. This is not a new thing. Throughout the Old Testament, Israel walks away from God yet He calls them back to be His people. Sometimes they do, and sometimes, like in Malachi, they decide that following God is futile. Even with God's answers and counter-accusations, they are not willing to change. The courtroom scene unfolds like this:

- Israel accuses God of not loving them. They don't see God at work for them (1:2).
 - God reminds them that He has always loved them since He chose them as His people. He chose Jacob and not Esau (1:3-5).
- God accuses Israel of improper worship, bringing unworthy sacrifices and offerings (1:6-14).
- God calls out Israel's priests for not caring by letting the people do whatever (2:1-9).
- God calls out men who divorce their wives for younger wives who follow other gods (2:10-16).
- Israel accuses God of being unjust. Everyone else seems to get away with sin (2:17).
 - God tells them that He will judge and that the time will come when all will be right (3:1-5).
- God accuses Israel of robbing from Him by withholding their tithes and offerings (3:6-12).
- Israel concludes that following God is futile. They do not want to continue in covenant with God and would rather go their own way (3:13-15).
- God concludes that He will not give up on His people, even just the small remnant of people who wish to follow Him. He calls them back to be His people (3:16-4:6).

This court case reveals the heart condition of Israel. They didn't care about God anymore and this was reflected in their worship, leadership, relationships and giving.

Discussion Questions

- 1) When we participate in church and read scripture, we are often faced with questions and stories that test our heart conditions as well. Where are we with our relationship with God? Has it become tiresome? Are we excited? It's okay to be honest about where we are at.

Giving is a Clue

God's accusations against Israel concerning their tithes (3:6-12) is one of the most cited passages of Malachi in the church. It is often used as a means of guilt or promise to increase the giving of church members. We could conclude from this passage that if we do not tithe (usually 10%), we are robbing God, and if we do tithe, then God is sure to bless us. But we need to be careful with the use of scripture in this way. We need to balance the rest of the Bible and the reality of the new covenant with what Malachi is saying.

In looking at the context of Israel and their covenant with God, we find that tithing was part of the laws created for their people (Leviticus 27 among other places). Their tithes went to pay for temple duties as well as the Levites who took care of the temple system. In a sense, the tithe was a tax. It was required of everyone. To withhold it was like withholding your tax from the government. Israel wasn't paying what they agreed to pay while expecting God to bless them.

Israel's lack of giving was a clue to their heart condition with God. They had given up their faith and the withholding of tithes reflected that. It wasn't important for them to live up to their obligations anymore. This breaking of covenant was a sign that they were no longer interested in relationship with God.

Discussion Questions

- 2) Do you think that your giving is a reflection of your relationship with God? Is it fair to see it that way? Do you ever feel like you are withholding something that God wants you to give?
- 3) Take an inventory of your giving. What do you give? To whom? When? Why? What are the reasons behind your giving patterns? What determines your generosity?

Investing vs. Taxing

When Jesus came to inaugurate the new kingdom and new covenant, He welcomed everyone who believes in Him to take part in it. A new family was born and all are welcomed to become a part of God's people. Although relationship is central to both the old and the new covenant, the new covenant is vastly different. There is no longer any temple or sacrifice needed, Jesus dwells in each of us and offers us His grace when we believe. You no longer need a priest since we are a priesthood of all believers. Also, there is no more tithing tax.

But before we breathe a sigh of relief, we need to see to what the Bible actually calls us. And what we find is a new mentality and way of living that is in fact much harder than a 10% tithe.

- Jesus teaches that the kingdom of God is worth giving up everything for (Matthew 13).
- Jesus teaches that wealth can actually keep us away from the kingdom. It is far better for us to give everything away to the poor than to be rich (Mark 10).
- Jesus commends the widow who gives all she has out of her poverty (Mark 12).
- We are called to care for the poor (Matthew 25).
- The example of the early church is to care for each other and share their resources (Acts 2).
- We are called to excel in everything, including our giving (2 Corinthians 8).
- We are called to offer everything we are to God because everything is His (Romans 12).

Whereas a tax assumes that we pay what we owe and live on the rest, giving in the kingdom is an investment into what is most important. God invites us to partner in the work He is doing by giving all we have to Him. It's not about 10% and living off the rest - it's about living on as little as possible so we can give the rest away. That will look different for everyone, and everyone needs to figure that out for themselves (2 Corinthians 9:6-7).

We should be less concerned with whether or not we are giving the right amount and more concerned with where our heart is. Are we invested in the kingdom of God? Do we believe in the work God is doing in the world? Are we willing to give up some of our own luxuries to help the poor, marginalized and vulnerable? If we really believe in that work, there is no limit to what we will be willing to give.

Picture This

Two couples, Susan & Bob and Mary & Peter, each decide that they want to strengthen their marriages. Each couple goes out to a restaurant once a week to spend time together and talk about life. Bob thinks this is part of his duty as a husband and goes along. But after a few weeks, this time becomes a chore. His mind wanders, he plays on his phone and can't wait to go home and watch tv. Peter understands that this time is precious and makes sure they are not distracted. He turns off his phone and gives undivided attention to his wife. They both put in the time to go for supper. Which one felt like a tax and which one like an investment? What's the difference?

Discussion Questions

- 4) Do you think it is important to look at tithes and offerings as an investment? What do you think you are investing into? What do you think is in it for the giver?

Investing in the Kingdom?

In 2 Corinthians 9:6 we read that “Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.”

We are sowing into the kingdom of God. But the things we will reap are not material and not always for us. The above passage continues by saying that we will reap righteousness. That seems less appealing when you are expecting God to be a vending machine who gives you something you really want because you gave to the church. But what happens with our investments in the kingdom is far more valuable than anything material. When we sow in the kingdom, we will reap in the kingdom. The poor will be taken care of. The hurt will receive hope and healing. The world will find reconciliation, and more and more people will find their way into relationship with God. There is no monetary value we can put on that kind of a return.

Discussion Questions

- 5) What kind of hopes do you have for your church and community? How do you want the world to experience God?
- 6) What will it take for these dreams to come true? What is required of you financially? What plan are you going to set into motion to make this happen? What changes will you make in your life so that you can invest in the kingdom of God?

Our Giving Plan

Jessica and I (Moses) are more than happy to meet with anyone who wants to talk about finances. We are happy to be open about our own story if that is helpful. We also wanted to share our giving strategy in the hopes that others may benefit from it. We have a long way to go in terms of our generosity, but this is where we are right now.

Who gives? - Jess and I decide our giving together. We believe it is a family decision.

What do we give? - At least 10% of our income. We believe this is a good place for us to start because we have learned that we can very easily live off the rest without much sacrifice.

When do we give? - We set aside our giving at the beginning of each month because we know it is much harder to give a very large amount at the end of the year. Waiting until we give raises the risk that we will spend the money on things we don't need.

How do we give? - We have found that organizations will take our money any way they can. We give cash, online, and our church (Sterling) even has direct deposit.

Where do we give? - From our giving, we give about 80% to Sterling and 20% to organizations that we believe do really good work.

Why do we give?

- As a sign of thankfulness to God for giving us what we have.
- As a sign of trust in God to provide for us.
- As an acknowledgement that everything belongs to God and we are only stewards.
- Because Jesus said we should care for those in need.
- Because we said we would when we became members of Sterling.

Resources for Further Study (available for loan from Sterling)

Nahum - Malachi by Elizabeth Achtemeier (Interpretation Commentary, 1986).

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*“For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid;
that foundation is Jesus Christ.” 1 Cor. 3:11*