

MALACHI: GIVE GOD THE TITHE**MALACHI 3:6-12**

Did you hear about the three men who were discussing how each of them determined the amount of money they should give to the Lord? The first man said he drew a circle on the ground, took all the money out of his pockets, and threw it into the air. Whatever landed inside the circle belonged to the Lord and whatever landed outside the circle, he spent. The second man disagreed. He said the proper way to determine how much money to give to the Lord was to throw it all into the air, yes, but whatever fell outside the circle was God's. He then spent the money that fell inside the circle. The third man said the other two men were both wrong. He said he threw his money into the air and whatever God wanted, God kept. Whatever fell to the ground was the man's to spend! How do you determine what you should give to the Lord?

So, today we conclude a brief series of messages answering this question, "How can you get and keep God's blessing?" What's a blessing? It's really any kind of good gift we receive that makes our lives better in some profound, important way. Of course, other people can bless us and we can bless others. But the greatest blessings find their source in God. God's blessings are as wonderful and infinite as God Himself. Anything that comes from God that enriches your life and makes it better in some way deserves to be considered a blessing. God wants to bless us in many ways, because He loves us as deeply and comprehensively as any parent loves his or her child.

Now, today I want us to observe the connection God makes between tithing and His blessings in life. I didn't make the connection. God did. Please turn to the Old Testament book of Malachi and see it for yourself. God's people in the Old Testament – the nation of Israel – had once again fallen into idolatry and rejection of God. God sent a prophet named Malachi to call them to change their ways and restore their relationship with God. What does it mean to change your ways or – to use a Bible word – repent? What does that look like? God's answer here might surprise you! He didn't say the people of Israel should just feel really bad about their behavior. He didn't say they should pray and read the Bible more. He didn't even say they should go to the Temple and worship God more. In the passage we read, God implied clearly that repentance – turning back to Him, changing their ways – looked like tithing. Today's message is a pretty simple, straightforward explanation of tithing and this passage in Malachi by asking and answering seven questions briefly. I hope you'll appreciate how the practice of tithing is one way to get and keep God's blessings in life.

#1: WHAT IS THE TITHE?

Quite simply, a tithe is 10% or a tenth of your income. Back in Bible times – before the widespread use of currency – people brought a tenth of their crops, a tenth of their livestock, and a tenth of any produce and presented it to the Lord. The tithe of your income belongs to the Lord. The Bible says, "One-tenth of the produce of the land, whether grain from the fields or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD and must be set apart to him as holy." (Lev. 27:30 NLT) It's quite right to say that our tithe is not truly

giving a gift to God, strictly speaking. In ancient times, kings claimed all the property in their realm as belonging to their kingdom. The people who actually lived on and worked the land were given a portion of its produce only by the king's grace because it was thought he actually owned everything.

Well, God does own everything! All of life and life itself is a gift from God to us. In the final analysis, God is the true owner of all our assets – cash, homes, cars, investments, real estate – everything. The tithe acts as a constant reminder to us that all we have comes from and belongs to God ultimately. We present the tithe to Him as a way of demonstrating we recognize that the other 90% ultimately belongs to Him as well. Tithing is an act of worship. That verse in Leviticus stated that our tithes are holy to the Lord. That means they matter to the Lord in a very significant way spiritually. When you tithe, you provide evidence you recognize God as your King. You acknowledge He owns everything. You gladly admit and rejoice in the fact that it's only by God's grace that you live and enjoy anything about life.

#2: WILL I GO TO HEAVEN IF I TITHE?

The answer is NO! People go to Heaven only because they have placed their trust in who Jesus is and what Jesus did at the cross and the empty tomb on their behalf. Their sins are forgiven and God gives them the gift of eternal life. Neither the practice of tithing nor the neglect of tithing determines a person's eternal relationship with God. Then, why tithe? If I can receive the ultimate blessing of getting into Heaven after my death, why shouldn't I just keep 100% for myself? Because, you will miss out on great blessings in this life. If you're disobedient to any aspect of God's will for your life, you will forfeit the blessing you might have derived from obeying God.

Yes, God is complex and beyond our understanding in many ways, but He can also be very simple. If you obey Him, He will cause blessings to flow toward you. If you disobey Him, you will – in many cases - block the blessings He wanted to give you. The fact is you can be on your way to Heaven, but miss out on many of God's blessings in this life. Some Christians never develop a prayer life; they miss out on blessings in this life. Others never interact with the Bible meaningfully; they miss out on blessings in this life. Some followers of Jesus are content to remain slaves to things like anxiety, bitterness, racism, sex outside of marriage, or materialism and so miss out on so many of God's blessings in this life. In the same way, if you excuse yourself from tithing, you will miss out on some kind of blessing in this life God wanted you to have.

#3: ISN'T TITHING JUST AN OLD TESTAMENT THING?

The underlying assumption of that question is that followers of Jesus are not bound to follow the rules and regulations found in the Old Testament. We've been freed from such legalism and rule-keeping through the free gift of grace available in Jesus. Every good lie has some truth in it. It's certainly true that some aspects of Old Testament teaching and requirements have no relevance to Christians any longer. For example, we no longer sacrifice animals as a part of how we worship God. Why not? Because

the New Testament makes it clear that Jesus' death on the cross was the ultimate sacrifice making animal sacrifice unnecessary. In contrast, most followers of Jesus believe the Ten Commandments are still relevant for God's people today. Why? Because in one way or another, they are repeated for us in the New Testament.

So, is tithing mentioned in the New Testament, then? Here's something Jesus said to the Pharisees. "For you are careful to tithe even the tiniest income from your herb gardens, but you ignore the more important aspects of the law—justice, mercy, and faith. You should tithe, yes, but do not neglect the more important things." (Mt. 23:23 NLT) If tithing was unnecessary or unimportant to Jesus, He had every opportunity right there to tell us, His followers, to abandon it. But instead, Jesus says that the Pharisees ought or should continue to tithe while focusing on the more important issues of justice, mercy, and faith. Not either/or, but both/and. Tithing isn't the most important part of following Jesus; nevertheless, I believe Jesus made it a timeless practice for us.

#4: IS A FAILURE TO TITHE STEALING FROM GOD?

That was found in our text today. The prophet quotes God as saying, "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.' But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' In tithes and offerings." (Mal. 3:8 NIV) When we keep anything that rightfully belongs to someone else, it's, by definition, a form of theft. No matter how wealthy you might be, if someone withholds money owed to you, it's still stealing. God doesn't have a cash flow problem – true enough! But to keep for ourselves what belongs to God is stealing just the same. Someone might say, "Big deal. God will never miss my little tithe!" But there's a second way you and I can rob God that most certainly does affect you and me. When we fail to give God what belongs to Him, we rob God of the opportunity to bless us. God has so structured the universe in which we live that it runs by certain spiritual laws or rules that He Himself has created. We reap what we sow. Long before we ever came along, God decided when we obey Him in any area of life, we invite His blessing. By the same token, when we disobey Him, we block or forfeit His blessing. God doesn't just suspend the laws or rules upon which He's created and founded the universe.

#5: WILL GOD REALLY CURSE ME FOR NOT TITHING?

Again, Malachi quotes God as saying, "You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me." (Mal. 3:9-10 NLT) Doesn't sound much like the loving God described elsewhere in the Bible, does it? The word "curse" conjures up an image of God as a kind of heavenly warlock stirring up a big pot of bad intentions that He's going to dump out on anyone who doesn't do what He wants. Not true. It's important to understand what the Bible means by a curse. When sin entered our world, it brought with it a curse. The Bible says the wages of sin is death. Sin causes or creates death in a variety of ways – yes, physical death ultimately, but also separation from God or spiritual death, the death of normal emotions, the death of good relationships with other people, and even financial death which can lead to a lifetime of poverty. When you obey God's will and do life His way, you enable His blessing to flow toward you. When you disobey God's will and do life

your own way, you erect a barrier or an obstacle against His blessing. So, the result of living without the blessing of God in any area of life – including our finances – is to experience a kind of curse.

Here's an image I want to leave with you. Without God's blessing and protection, every person is vulnerable to what might be called the "the rain of financial circumstances." We all know rain falls in different ways. Sometimes it rains really hard – torrentially – while at other times it just sprinkles or drizzles. By way of analogy, then, sometimes we have these tremendous financial problems while at other times we have just minor financial difficulties. Regardless, we can go through life with no protection or help from God financially. That's the kind of curse God is talking about here.

However, when we tithe and when we consistently put into practice and live out God's will for us financially, we move under "God's umbrella of financial grace." Under His umbrella, God both blesses and protects us financially. Now be careful. It would be a foolish lie for me to claim people who tithe never get an unexpected bill or never face financial difficulties. Not true! But over the long journey of life, people who tithe look back over the years and can tell you many stories of how God's grace and blessing had a definite financial dimension to it. Sure, you can decide to get out from underneath God's umbrella of financial grace by not tithing. And you will likely get soaked by the rain of financial circumstances. God allows you to make that choice. It's a really dumb choice, but – unfortunately – many followers of Jesus make it.

#6: WHAT ARE THE WINDOWS OF HEAVEN?

God says here in Malachi, "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,' says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, 'I will open the windows (floodgates) of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!" (Mal 3:10 NLT) Floodgates or windows are simply an image that underline the fact God wants to bless us. It reveals both God's desire to bless you abundantly as well as to point to the abundance of the blessing itself. Did you notice how the Lord invites us to test Him out in this matter? This is the only place in the Bible where God gives us permission to test Him to see if His claims are true. It's as if God asks us for permission to pour His blessing into our lives! It's true of every area of life including the financial area. Doing life God's way is the path to blessing. Do life your own way and forfeit His blessing. It's our choice.

There's a story of someone who visited a huge grain farm in Canada. 2,500 acres! He asked the farmer how he planted his crop. Do you think he pulled out a random ear of corn, popped out a few kernels, and then planted them one by one in the ground as he walked along? Not on your life! Instead, the farmer showed him a huge distributor some 30 feet wide. He said, "We take a double tandem truck, fill it with certified seed, back it up to the distributor, open the slots, and pour the seed into the soil." He went on to say, "If you're ever going to be cheap, don't be cheap with the seed!" One bushel of seed yields thirty bushels of harvested grain in a good year. Thirty to one. A pretty

good return, yes? God says if you will put Him to the test in this area of tithing, He will bless you abundantly. Don't be cheap with the seed!

Let's be careful not to overstate what God is saying. God doesn't promise to make any tither wealthy. He doesn't promise you'll never have any financial problems. He does promise to meet your needs. Also, it's obviously true there are godless, evil people who attain fantastic financial wealth while some godly, good people may stay financially marginal all of their lives. But if you want blessing – real, genuine blessing as God defines it that reaches beyond this life into eternity - you will choose to live your life God's way which includes tithing. And, let's remember, not all of God's blessings are financial. In fact, His greatest blessings – forgiveness of our sins and an eternal relationship with Him – have nothing to do with money. God can bless those who obey Him in an infinite number of ways and it's His deep desire to do so.

#7: DOES GOD PROTECT ME FINANCIALLY WHEN I TITHE?

I believe that's suggested here. "Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,' says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. 'Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight,' says the LORD of Heaven's Armies." (Mal. 3:11-12 NLT) This is an additional way to think about that umbrella of financial grace God extends to people who live His way financially. In the Old Testament, insects – like a plague of locusts – might come through and eat every green thing imaginable. Or a disease or a drought might prevent anything from growing. The result was financial ruin and economic poverty.

There's a principle here that we can apply to our lives today. There are many things that can eat up or destroy our financial resources today as well. It might be chronic unemployment or underemployment, or a barrage of unexpected bills, or all the appliances in your house breaking down at one time, or illnesses not covered by insurance, or investments that went south, or money owed to us that's not repaid. Again, let's not overstate what God promises. God doesn't promise tithers you'll never lose your job, or your car will never break down with a costly repair, or your one year old refrigerator will never blow up. The Lord still uses all of those kind of challenges to get us to trust Him more fully at every level of life. The promise here is about not getting wiped out and facing financial ruin. What I hear here is that when we tithe faithfully, God not only blesses us, but He also holds back from us the kind of financial disasters that threaten to destroy us.

There's all kinds of blessings that result from tithing! I like the story of the two businessmen – Fred and Bob - whose small plane crashed on a small, uncharted island way out in the ocean. After they managed to put together a rough camp, Fred told Bob he was really afraid they'd never be found. Bob had an interesting answer. "Not to worry. I make \$20,000 a week." "Who cares?" Fred grumbled, "We're stuck out here on an island with no communication at all." Bob just smiled, "Just stick with me and you'll be fine. I make \$20,000 a week." Fred lost his cool and shouted, "What good is

your money going to do us out here?" Bob answered calmly, "You don't understand. I tithe faithfully. Believe me, my pastor will find me!"

Just thought I'd add a little levity to a serious, sometimes controversial subject this morning! But, on a related issue, I do think it's important to tell you that Cheryl and I gratefully give more than a tithe to the ministry of this congregation. Why tell you that? First, because I want you to know I'm not going to ask you to do what I'm not doing myself. Second, we want to testify to the simple fact that Malachi 3 is true. God has blest our lives in many ways and not just in terms of material possessions. Sure, we've had some big ups and downs in life like everyone else, but God's dominant message over our lives? Blessing! There are other tithers here who would be glad to give the same testimony today. Three, this church deserves your tithe. We're trying to do God's work in God's way. When you tithe to this church, regardless of what amount it is, you make yourself important to the Lord and His work in this place. How can we all get and keep God's blessing? Of course, there are many answers to that question. But one answer is quite simple: give God the tithe.