

Facing the Temptation to Waver

One of our great temptations is the temptation to waver in our commitment to the Lord. Our relationship with the Lord is just like some marriages that need to be revitalized. What's heart-breaking is that He has done so much for us, and we know that we owe Him our total allegiance, and yet, we find ourselves regularly drifting from our sacred commitment to Him. So it was with the children of Israel in the 5th century BC. Upon their return from Babylonian exile, they found themselves drifting in several ways: worship, marriage and divorce, and giving. So Malachi calls them back to intimacy with God in their covenant with Him.

Malachi 3:6-12

6 “For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. 7 From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ 8 Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. 9 You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. 10 Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. 11 I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. 12 Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

This text answers three important questions for us:

I. Why is God so angry?

Because His people are withholding the tithe.

What was the tithe?

In the OT there were three purposes of the tithe: caring for the poor, providing for their teachers, and the worship of God—tithes still pay for these three things.

But, above all, the tithe was a symbol of their belonging to Him—just like the Passover or the Sabbath, or just like a wedding ring today symbolizes my unique bond to my wife. In the NT, there are two types of arguments for the tithe: explicitly in Mt. 23:23, and implicitly in other NT teachings. All New Testament teachings on giving—generosity, cheerfulness, proportionality, etc.—come directly from the OT. Furthermore, the NT teaches us that, just as Abraham tithed to Melchizedek in Gen. 14, so we also, the children of Abraham (Gal. 3 and 4), tithe today to the Priest after the order of Melchizedek—Jesus Christ (Heb. 7:1-10)

This is why you never receive a thank you note from the church and why you'll never be invited here to a party for major donors; the tithe belongs to God. And this is why the poor and those struggling financially have nothing to fear or to dread. The tithe provides the answer: we all simply give what we have, not what we don't have.

What did our behavior feel like to Him?

If you've ever been robbed, you know how it feels—outrageous! What brazen impudence!! Yet there are many church members who are doing the same thing when we withhold the Lord's tithe.

Some may say, "the Law is only applicable to OT saints." It is true that we are no longer under the condemnation of the law, and it is true that we are no longer motivated primarily by the threats of the law, but we are in a marriage covenant with God. Imagine if I said to my wife, "it makes no difference if I fulfill my husbandly duties, because I know you will forgive me." That's how silly it is for us to act as though it makes no difference if we fulfill our role in our covenant relationship with God.

II. What does God want us to do?

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.

What was the storehouse? Recall that Hezekiah built the storehouses as an annex to the temple. The whole tithe, then, is to be brought to the temple. But what is the temple today? In the New Testament we read that we, the Church, are the temple of God (I Cor. 3:16,17; Eph. 2:19-21; I Pt. 2:4,5). The Protestant Reformers told us that there are three distinctive marks of the true Church, the temple of God: the faithful preaching of the Word and the Gospel, the proper administration of the sacraments, and healthy church discipline. Only the local church fits that description.

But what about all the parachurch organizations that need our support? We support them with tithes and offerings distributed by the elders and deacons of the local church and with the many offerings we make beyond the tithe to the local church, but we dare not send them a portion of the tithe, which belongs in God's house.

III. What difference does it make?

God gives us amazing blessings.

There are 3,573 promises in the Bible. The first one is Gen. 3:15 and the last one is Rev. 22:20. The only promise in the Bible that is accompanied with a challenge to test God is found in Malachi 3:10. Test Him!

In the Old Testament, God's blessings were experienced in material ways, as described in verses 11 and 12. But how does He bless us now? He says in verse 7 that if we return to Him, He will return to us. He will again give us the joy of His pleasure, His empowerment in mission, and His fruitfulness in life. Consider this letter I received from Joe Bradley (now with the Lord) after I preached on this same text 19 years ago:

Dear Sandy,

I want to share a story with you about myself. I was well past middle age when the Lord finally decided that it was time for me to meet His Son and give my life to Him. As is the case with any new Christian, I was hungry for the Gospel. It was about this time that Lane Adams was selected as the Senior Minister at Second. What a preacher! His ability to present the Lord Jesus as the Living Savior came as a breath of fresh air to this baby Christian. Sunday after Sunday I would sit in the sanctuary and feel spiritually lifted up and yet there was something wrong – something was missing. It wasn't until Lane preached a stewardship sermon that the mystery was solved. He used the third chapter of Malachi as his text, and the light finally dawned when he got to that part where Malachi speaking for God told the people, "You have robbed me in tithes and offerings." I had been robbing God. That was what was wrong. We weren't tithing – far from it. Ten percent right off the top – it just didn't seem possible. It didn't come easy at first – house notes, car notes, children in school, bills to pay, and very little if anything left over at the end of the month – but we did it. We started the very next Sunday and have continued to experience the joy of God's blessing – just as He promised. Preach boldly about stewardship, Sandy. Convey to those listening that the Lord truly opens the

windows of heaven and the joy of His love to those who heed his admonition with regard to giving. He does open the windows of heaven.

Discussion Questions

1. Why does the Bible talk so much about money?
2. Why should we derive much pleasure from bringing God's tithe into His temple?
3. How has God poured out His blessings on you? If we tithe, what sort of blessings should we anticipate from Him?
4. Describe what you think would happen at Second Presbyterian Church if every member tithed to the storehouse.
5. Why do you think the Israelites in Malachi's day failed to tithe? What was the key to their future repentance?

Going Deeper

1. Develop your giving plan for the rest of this year.
2. What can you sacrifice in order to give to the Lord more generously?

