

08-23-09

Malachi 3:6-12<sup>i</sup>

### Introduction

I don't know where you get your news these days...maybe Fox or CNN or one of the other networks. But I'd bet that few of you are regular readers of Lark News...which happens to be one of only 3 or 4 Christian humor websites I've ever come across. Now I don't necessarily want you to go looking for Lark News...some of their made-up articles can be so sharp and critical that they're almost painful to read. But I do want to share with you this report that turned up not too long ago...

#### Church Expels Freeloading Members

Julie and Bob Clark were stunned to receive a letter from their church this month...asking them to participate—or worship elsewhere. “They basically called us freeloaders,” says Julie. “We were freeloaders,” says Bob.

In a move that may signal rough times for uninvolved Christians, trend-setting Faith Community Church has asked “non-participating members” to stop attending. “No more Mr. Nice Church,” says the executive pastor, newly hired from Verizon Wireless. “Providing free services to complacent Christians is not our mission.”

Faith Community sent polite-but-firm letters to many families this month—families who attend services but never volunteer, never tithe, and do not belong to a small group or other ministry.

“Before now,” said one staff member, “we made people feel comfortable and welcome...and then tried to persuade them to give a little something in return. But no more! We're done being the community nanny.”

Surprisingly, the move to disinvite people has drawn a positive response from men in the community, who like the idea of an in-your-face congregation. “A church that doesn't allow wimps—that rocks!” says Bob Clark, who admires the church more since they told him to get lost.<sup>ii</sup>

Now obviously, the article is a joke...or is it? (Doo-doo-doo-doo) Just to put your mind at ease, I doubt that First Baptist will send out letters like this anytime soon. But we are going to talk about giving this morning. Giving is (after all) an important biblical topic...and if you've been paying attention in worship...you'll notice that we've tried to give you fair warning: We sang a song that says, “This is my offering, dear Lord.”

- Ruth Ann read a Bible verse where God says, “Bring the whole tithe into my storehouse...”

And so...if you're the kind who thinks, “Preacher's talkin' 'bout money; church must be in the red again,” let me assure you: that's not the case. Even with people being in-and-out of town during the summer...and even with all the economic turmoil we've had lately...our giving has run pretty close to 95% of budget. So I'm actually fairly impressed by our congregation's financial faithfulness.

- And if you're the kind who says, “Look, I'm giving already. So this doesn't apply to me,” then let me urge you not to write-off the next few minutes so quickly. Because even though we are going to talk about giving, this message really isn't about money.
- It's about our hearts...and whether we're offering whole-hearted devotion to the God who loves us so much...that he would give His one and only Son...so that whoever believes in him wouldn't perish...but have eternal life.

### Malachi: The Setting

This is the third week in our four-week series on Major Truth from Minor Prophets. And today, we're looking at Malachi...the very last book of the Old Testament. Of course, to understand Malachi...we need to know at least a little about the people to whom he spoke. And perhaps the most important thing for us to know is that those people are living in Israel post-exile.

If you remember any of your Bible history, you may recall that God's people had a bit of a faithfulness problem back in the Old Testament. So God allowed them to be conquered by the Babylonian Empire...and most of the Hebrew people were carried off into exile.

- After they'd been humbled...and after their hearts returned to the Lord...God brought them back from Babylon (in about 540 BC). And even though the land they were going back to was devastated...and the Temple was demolished...the people were pumped up!
- This time they were going to be faithful. This time, they were going to make it work. So they moved back into the land of Israel...and they sat back and waited for a new Golden Age to begin.

To their surprise, however, things didn't turn around very quickly. The capital of Jerusalem still looked more like a war zone than the host city for God's presence on earth. And the people struggled through years of drought and famine...and the occasional plague of locust. And this went on for almost 60 years...until God sent the priest Ezra and the governor Nehemiah (we studied him earlier this year)...

- And between the two of them, they restored the temple and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem...
- And once again, the people thought, "This is it! Now God is going to act. He'll send the Messiah. He'll set up His kingdom...and this will be a land that flows with milk & honey."

But then...for another 10 or 15 years...nothing happened. Nothing went terribly wrong...but nothing went terribly right, either. The people didn't starve; they weren't in danger—but they certainly didn't see much sign of the blessing God had promised. They kept performing their religious duties: they went to Temple and offered sacrifices. But there wasn't much passion in it.

### **Malachi: The Message**

And then—onto that stage—steps Malachi. And if you look at the 1<sup>st</sup> verse of the 1<sup>st</sup> chapter—you'll find that his message goes like this: The word of the Lord to Israel—"I have loved you," says the Lord.

Now let's stop for just a minute and think about that message...because if there's any word that "God spoke then" which is still the word that "God speaks now"—this is it. "I have loved you," says the Lord. In fact, we—even more than the people of ancient Israel—have reason to understand and put our faith in God's love... because we've got not only God's promises. We've got promises fulfilled.

- We have Jesus...who demonstrates God's love for us in that—while we were sinners—he died for us.
- We have the Spirit...who testifies with our spirit that we are God's children.
- We have the Body of Christ—brothers and sisters in faith who encourage us and pray for us and make God's love real for us.

"I have loved you," says the Lord...but do we believe it? When we or someone we love gets sick...do we believe God loves us? When the economy heads south...and bills pile up and finances get tight...do we trust that he cares? When a marriage gets strained or a child rebels or a friend betrays us or we look at our lives and wonder: "What happened to the joy?"—do we have faith that our Heavenly Father loves us still?

- And if we do believe...what are we doing about it?

The people of Israel, you see, were having a hard time believing. Oh, they knew what they were supposed to believe. They knew about God's mighty deeds in the past...about Moses and David and all the promises of the prophets.

- But when they looked at their lives...they couldn't see past the hardship and the waiting. They couldn't see evidence to give them confidence that God's promises were coming true.
- So in response to this incredible message—"I have loved you," says the Lord—all Israel can say is, "How have you loved us?" Where's the proof, God? What have you done for us lately?

It's almost like the people want to put God on trial. But as Malachi makes clear...it's not God or God's love that's in question. It's the love of His people—people who've allowed themselves to drift away...people who are just going through the motions of faith...people who've abandoned their whole-hearted devotion...and it's the Malachi's job to call them back.

### **Malachi: Three Challenges**

Of course, from the very beginning, God has invited us to love Him with all our heart and soul and mind and strength...and Malachi points out several ways that the people of Israel are failing to do that. But in each case, the prophet's message invites us to look beyond their failures...so that we can examine our own lives—and the quality of our devotion.

First, Malachi says, the people are worshiping God with what's left...instead of what's right. God is worthy of praise and honor and glory...more than they could ever give! So scripture calls them to offer their very best. God deserves the 'first-fruits' of their lives—the first portion of the harvest...the finest animals from the flock. But that's not what the people are bringing.

- “You show contempt for my name,” the Lord says. “When you offer blind animals for sacrifice...when you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering those to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty.

Now thankfully...we no longer have to bring sacrifices to the Temple the way the people of Israel did. Our sacrifice has been made—once and for all—when Jesus went to the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. But that doesn't mean that God no longer deserves our best. The question is: Do we give Him our best? Do we offer God the finest of all that we are and all that we have...or do we give Him our leftovers?

- When we can find a couple hours a day to watch TV...but can't find a few minutes a day to abide in God's Word...is that our best...or is that what's leftover?
- When we go to school or work...and devote energy and talent and enthusiasm to 'getting the grade' or 'getting ahead'...but we go to church and sit on the sidelines...or look for a ministry that requires the least amount of commitment...is that our finest...or is that what's convenient?
- When we can find the passion to cheer when Steve Smith catches a pass in a Panthers pre-season game...but we can't find the passion to sing enthusiastically or pray fervently when we come to worship...is that whole-hearted devotion? Or is that what we have to spare...after our best has been used up elsewhere?

Next, Malachi says, the people are walking away from faithfulness to God...and walking toward friendship with the world. Now the exact practice the prophet condemns has to do with divorce and remarriage.

- In chapter 2 Malachi says, “Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god.” And he then proceeds to offer one of the strongest descriptions of the sacredness of marriage found in all of scripture. When the people complain that their prayers aren't being answered and their offerings aren't being accepted, Malachi offers this explanation:
- It's because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You've been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. Has not the Lord made the two of you one? You belong to him in body and spirit...So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

But in the larger context of Israel's history—taking up with foreign women usually meant taking up with foreign gods, too. It meant turning away from obedience and holiness... and turning toward idolatry and sin. Naturally, the people didn't see it that way. After all, they were still good folks, weren't they? They went to Temple. They offered sacrifices. What more did God want?!

- Besides, that's just the way the world was...and you can't be that different from the world, can you? What would people think? How would you 'fit in'?

But half-hearted obedience is not whole-hearted devotion. Years later, the apostle Paul would write, “Offer yourselves as a living sacrifice—holy and pleasing to God—this is true worship. Don’t be conformed to the pattern of this world, but be transformed....” Our devotion isn’t measured by pious talk or by how often we show up at church. It’s measured in lives of holiness and obedience. It’s measured in transformation.

- So...when we choose the movies we see or the TV programs we watch or websites we visit...are we being conformed or transformed?
- When we talk with friends and co-workers...and we have a choice to engage in conversation that tears people down and spreads gossip...OR to speak in a way that builds others up and defends their reputation... do we let the world squeeze us into its mold...or do we let Jesus change us into his image?
- When we face that endless list of daily decisions—to take the easy way rather than the right way...to compromise rather than speak out...to seek wealth or power or popularity rather than God... do we offer half-hearted...or whole-hearted devotion?

Only after all that...does Malachi get around to the issue of giving. He says (as you heard in our scripture lesson) that the people are robbing God. And it would probably be an understatement to say that they disagreed. “That’s ridiculous,” they said. “How are we robbing you?”

- “In tithes and offerings,” the Lord says. “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.”

Now I suspect that most of us here today have been around church long enough to know that a tithe is 10%. And in the Old Testament, at least, a tithe is ‘entry-level’ giving. It’s the ‘bare minimum’ of what’s expected, Leviticus said that “A tithe or tenth of everything from the land—whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees—belongs to the Lord; it is holy to the Lord” (Lev. 27:30). Of course, whether you’re currently giving a tithe is between you and God. But let me just ask you to think about this:

- I did a little research this week and found—that in 2007—the median household income in the 28103 zip code was about \$42,000. That means that if you lined up every family in the Marshville area...in order of income...half would make more than that and half would make less.
  - So let me have you raise your hand if you make more than...I’m just kidding.

What this means—is that if we’re making ‘around’ the median income...then that’s ‘around’ \$3500 a month... which is ‘around’ \$850 a week...which means that a tithe would be ‘around’ \$85 a week. We could ask a lot of questions about that figure: Is that based on gross income or after tax income? Is it based on wages only or investment earnings, too? What about extenuating circumstances? And even though those are interesting questions...I’m not sure they really matter. I only offer the numbers so we can consider this:

- If somebody broke into our church one night and stole our computers and our altar pieces...we’d probably think that was a pretty despicable crime. And if we were passing the offering plate one Sunday—and somebody reached down and took cash out rather than dropping cash in—we’d probably object.
- But if we’re giving less than ‘around’ \$85 a week (your numbers may vary)...we might be doing more-or-less the same thing. According to the prophet Malachi, we might be stealing from God.

Of course, the Bible experts among us might object: “But Preacher, that’s the Old Testament! And we don’t live under all those rules and regulations. We’ve been set free in Christ. We’re not under Law; we’re under grace.”

- And that is exactly right. You can search the New Testament and you will not find a command about tithing...just the constant reminder that giving is a good thing—and that God loves those who do it cheerfully.

But let me share with you a little story told by Erwin McManus, the pastor of Mosaic Church in Los Angeles. He describes a time that a man was thinking about joining the church. And the man asked if Mosaic was a 'law church' or a 'grace church.' Well, Erwin was pretty sure he was being set up...but he jumped in anyway: "Naturally, we're a grace church."

- "Well that's good," the man said. "I was worried that you were one of those 'law' churches that told people they had to tithe and such."
- "Oh no," Erwin said, "We're a 'grace' church. The law says, 'Do not murder.' But grace says you don't even have to have hatred in your heart. The law says, 'Don't commit adultery,' but grace says you don't even have to have lust in your heart. The law says, 'Give 10%," but grace always takes us beyond the law. You can give 20, 30, or 40%. We would never stop you from living by grace."<sup>iii</sup>

In the end, you see, giving isn't about our income... or the monetary needs of our church. No, giving is about gratitude. Giving is about our response to grace. Giving is about our hearts. That's why Jesus said, "Where your treasure is...that's where your heart will be" (Mt. 6:21). And God wants to be our treasure. He wants us to offer Him whole-hearted devotion.

### Conclusion

When it comes to giving, our scripture lesson offers one of the most amazing promises you'll find in the entire Bible: "Test me in this," says the Lord, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."

- That almost makes it sound like God is the greatest vending machine ever! Just drop in your tithe and out drop blessings: cash and cars and houses and stuff.
- And there are plenty of preachers out there who will tell you: that's exactly what God has in mind.

But I'm not sure that's what this promise is about. First of all, for those who have whole-hearted devotion to God...God's presence is the greatest blessing they can receive. It's not about wealth or possessions or fancy toys. It's about knowing that God is with us...and He has promised He will be, even to the end of the age.

- But beyond that, when Malachi says God will "throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it," we need to remember that we were never meant to store it anyway. We were meant to give it away. We are blessed to be a blessing. And if our church is doing what it should—that's what happens...every time we give.

I hope each of us will give to First Baptist Church. In fact, I'd like to see us be obedient and tithe. After all, the church has bills to pay, too...and we're building a new facility...and we could use the money.

- But even more, I hope we'll remember that it's not about the money. It's about God's glory. It's about whole-hearted devotion. That's God wants—more than anything else. And that's what we can give Him...if we'll open our hearts.
- Would you open your heart today? This morning, why not give God the thing He desires most?
- Come and do that, as we sing our hymn of response: Higher Ground (# 399).

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<sup>i</sup> Malachi: Prophet of Whole-hearted Devotion. Third in a series of four: *Major Truth from Minor Prophets*.

<sup>ii</sup> Joel Kilpatrick, "Mega-Church Downsizes, Cuts Non-Essential Members," Larknews.com (September, 2006).

<sup>iii</sup> *An Unstoppable Force*, Erwin McManus (Group Publishing, 2001), pp. 204-5.