

Malachi 3:7-12 Part II
Testing God: Exposing the Prosperity Gospel
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Introduction

Last week I introduced this third section of the book of Malachi. What we saw was that God accused the Israelites of robbing Him. The Israelites evidenced their hardness of heart by cluelessly responding to God’s accusatory warning. In vs. 7 God promises His people that He will return to them if they come to Him on His terms. Really this is a promise mixed with fear. The Israelites then question God as if they had been perfectly obedient to Him. They say, “*How can we return to you?*” God then lays forth their disobedience, how they have failed to come to Him on His terms, in a specific way: “*Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me!*” God lets them know that He will not return to them unless they stop robbing Him. They then questioned Him again, “*You ask: How do we rob You?*” God then specifies their disobedience in as specific of terms as possible. “*[By not making the payments] of 10 percent and the contributions.*”

Their failure to come to God on His terms had everything to do with their refusal to give to God what was rightfully His. He commanded them in the law to give back to Him a portion of what He had given them. They were supposed to give Him a tithe (a tenth part) of their earnings and then they were obligated to give to certain offerings and sacrifices at certain festivals and celebrations as well. They failed to be faithful to God’s commandments in this area. He considered it nothing less than robbery for them to fail to give tithes and contributions to Him. Why? Because everything that they had ultimately came from Him. Everything we have is ultimately from Him. He has the right to tell us what to do with our things—our money, our bodies, our possession—because everything is His in the first place. Everything that we have, including our very lives, comes from Him. God owns our body, money, and possessions by virtue of the fact that He created our body, money, and possessions.

Malachi 3.9: A Curse for Their Good

God has already begun to curse Israel for their robbery of Him as can be seen from vs. 9.

You are suffering under a curse, yet you—the whole nation—are [still] robbing Me

From the context, it seems quite clear that the Israelites are already suffering under the curse of God. You will notice that God sent this curse upon them for the purpose of pointing out to them their need for repentance. In essence, God is informing them of why they have experienced such drought, famine, etc. The famine really had nothing to do with a lack of rain, sun, or luck; it had to do with the judgment of God. Sometimes God does this—He takes everything away from us so that we might realize our need for Him; so that we might see Him as the giver of all things; so that we might obediently come to Him out of our great need.

Malachi 3.10-12: God's Central Plea to the Israelites

In vss. 10-12 God invites the Israelites to test Him. This is quite the remarkable thing.

10 Bring the full 10 percent into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this way," says the LORD of Hosts. "See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure. 11 I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not ruin the produce of your ground, and your vine in your field will not be barren," says the LORD of Hosts. 12 "Then all the nations will consider you fortunate, for you will be a delightful land," says the LORD of Hosts.

Lets paint the picture of what God is saying to the Israelites here, and then we are going to examine what God says here in light of the rest of Scripture. First of all, notice the overall force of God's statement to Israel. God knows that Israel is suffering under His judgment because of their sin. One of the effects of His judgment is that they are in great want in a financial and materialistic way—it seems that they are going through a famine of sorts. In the midst of this God calls Israel to a challenge—He calls them to “test me.” This word “test” (*bohan*) literally means, “to try and learn the genuineness of an object by examination.”¹ This word was usually used in reference to testing the purity of metals through the refining process of smelting. Here we see that God wants the Israelites to put all of their weight upon Him, testing the truth, stability, and trustworthiness of his promises.

Really, when you think about it, Israel's true sin issue was not in their refusal to give their money and possessions to God. Their true sin was in their lack of belief. If Israel trusted the promises of God they would have given liberally and joyfully knowing that it is His to give, reward, and bless.

Slot Machine Obedience

Because this passage has been so ridiculously twisted by the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers, it will be valuable to consider just for a moment exactly what God is calling Israel to do here. It will actually be helpful to explain what God is *not* calling the Israelites to do first. So, what does God *not* mean when he says, “*test me in this way... See If I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for your without measure.*” God is not here calling the Israelites to bet on Him as a man bets on horse at the Kentucky Derby. God is not asking the Israelites to treat Him as some sort of a magical slot machine. In other words, He is not challenging them to gamble with their money. He is not saying, “Test me in this. If you bring your tithes to my house next week you can expect 4 new shiny mules to drop from heaven next week.” It is not a put the coins in, turn the crank, and see what surprise comes out the bottom. Thus God is not calling them to a one time act of obedience, where they test him for a short period of time and then quit if He doesn't deliver. No! This is a call to radical faith, radical dependence, radical trust, and radical commitment. The test that God is calling the Israelites to is more like a long-term investment than a short term risky venture. God is not desiring their

¹Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. DBLH 1043

tithes per se; after all, He created everything that they are giving back to him (see Psalm 50 for more details). What He wants is their total and complete devotion and commitment—He wants their hearts.

In other words, God's proposed test is not like the evangelistic plea, "Try Jesus." As if Jesus were some sort of an accessory that you can try on and if he doesn't fit, well... just put him back on the rack and look for something that fits you a bit better. You don't "Try Jesus." You submit to Jesus, radically commit yourself to Jesus, throwing yourself upon Him as your only hope. God is not here saying, "Try Yahweh!" He is commanding them (the verb "test me" is in the imperative mood) to test His faithful character by radically committing themselves to His promises as way of life. You do not "try" the King; you submit to the King. And it must be known as well that the verb "test me" is in the imperative mood; in other words, it is a command.

There are two vital questions that must be asked of this text in order to properly understand it.

Two Vital Questions

1. *Does this same principle of Malachi 3:10-12 carry over into the New Covenant (or New Testament or post-Pentecost) era, (the era in which we live)?*

There is an obvious change in God's dealings with humanity with the coming of Christ and everything involved in His death, resurrection, and ascension, and with the giving of the Spirit at Pentecost. For example, in the Old Covenant era God primarily dealt with the nation of Israel, while His emphasis in the New Covenant era is in making disciples of "all nations" (Matthew 28:19). So does this same principle found in Malachi 3:10-12 carry over into the New Covenant era? Before I answer that let me briefly and succinctly explain what the principle of Malachi 3:10-12 is. In essence, the principle of Malachi 3:10-12 is that God rewards the giver to the measure of his giving. In other words, what I am asking is this; *"In the New Covenant era does God promise to reward those who give in accordance with the degree of their generosity as He did in the Old Covenant era? God richly blesses those who walk in obedience. You can see this from vs. 10; God is promising to reward the Israelites with great abundance to the degree that they give and obey. Does this principle (of God rewarding according to obedience/giving) carry over into the New Covenant era?"*

And this is an important question primarily because this is the principle that has driven the health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel. You find people like T.D. Jakes, Joyce Meyer, Eddie Long, Joel Osteen, Kenneth Copeland, Benny Hinn, and many others teaching that the more you give to their ministries, the more abundance you will receive in return (whether the abundance be financial, prestige, materialistic--regarding bigger houses, luxury cars, or what have you--emotional, or spiritual. They teach that God richly rewards those who give to Him in faith. They suggest that Jesus came not just to save us from sin, death, and hell, but that he also came to save us from poverty, low self-esteem, and disease. And where do they get their fuel to continue preaching such promises? From passages like Malachi 3:10-12. In fact, Malachi 3:10-12 is one of the prosperity gospel's most overused passages.

So, does the principle of “to the measure that you give it will be given unto you” carry over into the New Covenant era? Yes, it does. By affirming that this principle does carry over for us in the New Covenant era, do I then affirm the health, wealth, and prosperity teachers in their teaching? No! In fact I believe that their teaching is destructive, manipulative, and dangerous for the people of God. It creates covetousness, materialism, unhealthy competition, and makes complete mishmash out of the overarching message of Jesus. So, no I do not affirm the health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel, but I do believe that the principle of Malachi 3:10-12 does carry over into the New Covenant era.

I want to take you to just two passages to prove it to you that this principle does carry over.

Luke 6:38

Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure—pressed down, shaken together, and running over—will be poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured back to you.

In the context it is clear that Jesus was emphasizing the giving of forgiveness and kindness to others. However, it seems clear that Jesus did not just having the giving of forgiveness in mind. It seems that he was speaking about our giving to each other in general. Thus, this passage does connect to the verses before it, but it also adds another dimension to it. Robert H. Stein in his commentary on Luke explains,

“This command goes beyond not judging, not condemning, and forgiving personal injuries and injustices. Like the Golden Rule (6:31), it seeks the positive good of others. As in the Beatitudes, the last member of the four-part series is expanded.”²

Here Jesus draws upon market place imagery, where the marketer will not just fill your lap sack (which is merely just the fold of the outer garment in ancient dress) with grain (or whatever you might purchase), but he does everything he can to compact the product so that as much as possible can fit in the lap sack, and will actually fill it to overflowing.³ The teaching of Jesus here is that not that you will receive to the degree that you give, but rather his point is that if you give unreservedly, liberally, and joyfully, that God will outgift (or outgive) you. Stein, once again, offers a helpful explanation.

The issue is not that human generosity is accorded the same generosity (nor more or no less) from God but that human generosity is rewarded with divine generosity, which is far greater.⁴

2 Cor 9:6

² Robert H. Stein, *Luke*, The New American Commentary: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1992), 212.

³ Stein’s explanation of this imagery is quite helpful. *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

Remember this: the person who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the person who sows generously will also reap generously.

This was a passage that we looked at last week. If you remember, in 2 Corinthians 8-9 Paul is admonishing the Corinthian believers to give bountifully to the poor saints in Jerusalem. He then motivates the Corinthian believers to give by calling attention to the same principle that is found in Malachi 3:10-12. His point is that the more seed the farmer puts into the ground, the greater the farmer's harvest (or the more food) the farmer will receive. If you sew your money for Gospel purposes, God will abundantly bless you. You reap according to your sowing. Your blessedness will be in accordance to the degree of your giving.

So, yes... I agree with the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers in regard to the principle that God richly blesses those who give. This is a principle that spans both the Old and the New Covenant eras. Where then do I part ways with the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers. Well... this leads us to my next question.

2. Is the nature of the blessings promised for obedient giving in the New different from the nature of the blessings promised for obedient giving in the Old?

You see, I affirm the fact that the principle of Malachi 3:10-12 carries over from the Old to the New, but is the nature of the blessings promised by God to those who give abundantly the same? And this is where I part company with the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers. What do I mean? Well... what is the nature of the blessing promised to the Israelites for their giving in Malachi 3:10-12? Let's be honest with ourselves, and give the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers their due. While they are completely and utterly wrong and in their preaching it would be the height of ignorance to suggest that they didn't have any passages to bolster their claims. After all, look at the nature of the blessings promised to the Israelites in Malachi 3:10-12.

10 Bring the full 10 percent into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this way," says the LORD of Hosts. "See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure. 11 I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not ruin the produce of your ground, and your vine in your field will not be barren," says the LORD of Hosts. 12 "Then all the nations will consider you fortunate, for you will be a delightful land," says the LORD of Hosts.

What is the nature of the promises of blessing? They are promised blessings that are materialistic, earthly, and physical. They are promised a literal, physical rich harvest! They are promised physical abundance, a literal, materialistic, physical, earthly productive land. WOW! The bulk of the promises given to the Israelites by God in the Old Testament were physical, materialistic, and earthly in nature. Why? Because Israel was God's physical, national people. God was setting up an earthly kingdom through the Israelites. He was! He set them up in a real chunk of land (Canaan), established real physical men to be their king (Saul, David, Solomon, etc), rallied a real army that carried real swords to draw the real blood of real physical, earthly enemies. Why did God set up

this earthly Kingdom? Well, why did God set up a real, earthly tabernacle where they sacrificed real, earthly lambs, bulls, and goats? He did so for the purpose of providing a finite, imperfect picture of true heavenly realities. The kingdom of the Old Testament set up by God (just like sacrificial system of the Old Testament set up by God) served as a type and shadow of the greater Kingdom that Christ came to inaugurate and establish.

You see, the problem of the health, wealth, and prosperity teachers is that they have failed to read the Old Testament through the eyes of the New. They fail to see the blessings promised to the Israelites are physical in nature, but what we see in the teachings of Jesus is that these physical promises find their ultimate fulfillment in the better, eternal promises of Christ. The Israelites were promised a literal piece of real estate on this earth—the land of Canaan was their promised land. What we find in Hebrews 11 is that Canaan is just a picture, a shadow of the glorious inheritance given us in Christ. In the New Covenant we are promised a land flowing with milk and honey, but the land we look forward to in the New Covenant makes the land of Canaan look like a plastic, child's play Lego board. The same goes for the physical promises God gave to the Israelites in the Old Covenant. God promised them physical, earthly blessings for their obedient giving, but these blessings were temporal in nature, paling in comparison to the blessings promised in Christ. Jesus, like Emeril Lagasse, takes the physical, earthly, temporal blessings promised to the Israelites for their obedient giving and, "Bam! Kicks it up a notch!"

The reason why so many people fall headlong into the deception of the health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel is because the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers have real texts of Scripture to bolster their promises. The only problem, however, is that all of their texts are from the Old Testament! All of the promises are of a physical, earthly nature because they were given to a physical, earthly people (most of whom, by the way, were unconverted). Jesus said that His kingdom is not of this world (John 18:36), and thus the blessings of His kingdom are also not going to be of this world. And it is not that God went from plan A in the Old to plan B in Christ; rather, it is that the promises given in the Old were meant to serve as types and shadows, foretelling greater promises that would be given in Christ.

Thus, the reason why so many people fall into the deception of the health, wealth, and prosperity Gospel is because they don't know how to put their Bibles together. They do not realize the great difference between the nature of the Old and New Covenants. They fail to read the Old through the eyes of the New. And the most damnable aspect of the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel is that it teaches people to store up for themselves weak, useless, petty, and temporal treasures. What we find with Jesus is that he takes the promises given in the Old and then ratchets them up a couple thousand notches and says; "No, you should not be chasing after houses, and cars, and clothes, and promotions, and prestige among mortals; rather you should be storing up for yourselves treasures that never rust, or fade—treasure that last forever. Don't mess with the temporal fleeting pleasures that the treasures that are bound to this earth bring; pursue treasures that have infinite value." And why do the greater treasures promised in the New Covenant have an infinite value? Because they can be enjoyed forever, and because your enjoyment of them will not be hindered by neither sin nor sinners.

You see, it is not necessarily true that I am not a health, wealth, and prosperity preacher. No! I am a health, wealth, and prosperity preacher *par excellence*! I am storing

up for myself treasures of health, wealth, and prosperity in a kingdom that lasts forever, where they can be enjoyed forever, and where the enjoyment of them will not be hindered by effects of sin or sinners.

Consider a few passages with me:

Matthew 6:2-4

2 So whenever you give to the poor, don't sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and on the streets, to be applauded by people. I assure you: They've got their reward! 3 But when you give to the poor, don't let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, 4 so that your giving may be in secret. And your Father who sees in secret will reward you.

Why did Jesus rail against the Pharisees in this passage? Because they were seeking earthly reward—the applause of men.

Matthew 6:19-20

19 "Don't collect for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. 20 But collect for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust destroys, and where thieves don't break in and steal. 21 For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

Verse 19 is really the climax and conclusion to the whole chapter. Matthew 6:19-20 comes after Jesus' prolonged attack against the Pharisees for storing up treasures (men's applause) that are bound to their lives on this earth. The Pharisees were seeking earthly reward, and Jesus was teaching them that the Pharisees were wrong in doing so. He is not saying that you should not give with the motivation to receive a reward. No, you should give with the understanding that God will reward you. But, you should not give necessarily for the purpose of receiving an earthly reward, but a heavenly reward. I do not understand how the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers miss the decisive words of Christ in the Gospels; not to mention all of the texts where God promises persecution and hardship upon His people. For example, Paul, in 2 Timothy 3:12 says,

"In fact, all those who want to live a godly life in Christ Jesus will be persecuted."

Jesus, in Matthew 5:10-12 says,

Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs. Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and falsely say every kind of evil against you because of Me. Be glad and rejoice, because your reward is great in heaven.

Which of the apostles lived lavish lives? They were all persecuted, and 11 of the 12 were martyred. None of them lived the life of luxury. Even John, the only apostle who

was not martyred, was exiled to the Island of Patmos (and Tertullian, an early church father, actually suggests that he was unsuccessfully boiled in oil before being exiled). On top of this, every health, wealth, and prosperity preacher either has already or will die. And not one of those health, wealth, and prosperity preachers will take their houses, boats, cars, or bank accounts with them to the other side of death.

This is not to say that Jesus does not bless us materially or financially when we give out of obedience, but it does mean that we should not be seeking the physical blessing; we should be seeking the heavenly treasure. God can and often times does bless with physical blessings, but these are not promised to us in the New Covenant era. Physical, earthly, and/or materialistic blessings are merely icing on the cake. Praise God that He delights to give us the icing, but our eye should be on the cake (the substance of the goodness) as opposed to the icing. When He does reward our obedience in giving we should take it and enjoy it, but we should never expect it. And why should we never expect material blessings for our obedience? Because he has never promised us material blessings for our obedience. Let me submit that God promises His people two things in return for their obedient giving (and I get these from the radically Spirit-charged words of the New Testament): (1) persecution and (2) big, fat, eternally satisfying, riches in heaven.

And this ultimately is the faith of Hebrews 11. The whole point of Hebrews 11 is that those who had faith did not receive what they were promised before they died. The point of Hebrews 11 is that true faith has the ability to enjoy treasures that cannot be given until after death has happened. If you don't get that, you don't understand Hebrews 11. The sort of faith discussed in Hebrews 11 is that sort that confidently awaits blessings that can only be tasted, handled, and touched in the Kingdom of Heaven. To use Hebrews 11 as a proof text for having faith that God will richly supply the believer with temporal, earthly blessings is to miss the point of the passage altogether. Look at the authors conclusion to the faith of Abraham and Sarah in Hebrews 11:13-16, 39:

These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been remembering that land they had come from, they would have had opportunity to return. But they now aspire to a better land—a heavenly one

Take a look at the last verse in Hebrews 11 as well. Hebrews 11:39 really is the conclusion to Hebrews 11, identifying the sort of faith that pleases God. What sort of faith is it—the sort that confidently lays hold of heavenly treasure.

All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us.

Conclusion

So the principle of Malachi 3:10-12 stands, but nature of the blessings promised in return for obedient and faithful giving is radically different. The blessings promised are eternal in nature as opposed to temporal, spiritual as opposed to physical. Jesus kicked it

up a few thousand notches. In Christ we have a better Covenant with better promises, riding on the back of better sacrifices, with greater rewards for obedience. Expend yourself for true rewards, eternal rewards! Thus we are to be seeking riches that cannot be accessed in reality until we reach the other side of glory, but riches that can be anticipated and thus enjoyed by confident faith right now, knowing that God will respond to our obedience by “opening up the floodgates of heaven and pouring out a blessing for you without measure.” Test God’s faithfulness in this way—commit yourself to His word and way and see if you will not be basking in eternal satisfaction and bliss on the other side of the grave. We can already begin to bask in them and enjoy them now through Spirit-empowered faith. It is not that the health, wealth, and prosperity gospel preachers make promises too lavish, it is that they make promises too petty. They are seeking after petty treasures while infinite, eternal ones dangle before their nose. Jesus says that you cannot live for two kingdoms. Unfortunately, the health, wealth, and prosperity preachers have not yet understood the incomprehensibly superlative nature of the rewards promised by Christ!