

Malachi 3:7-12***Robbing God****Jimmy Snowden**Sovereign Grace Fellowship: Sunday, August 16th, 2009****Introduction***

This morning we are going to be continuing our trek through the book of Malachi. Thus far it has become clear what the book of Malachi is all about. Primarily, Malachi is a word of warning. God is doing everything He can to point out to the Israelites their sinfulness in order to show them their need for repentance. We have seen God warn them over and over again that if they do not repent, He will come upon them in judgment. Malachi is a word of warning. As we approach our passage this morning we will see that God continues to bring railing accusations against Israel for her many sins. The particular issue that God brings up in this passage is their robbery of God. I do not believe that this issue of tithes is their worst sin, nor their only sin. What we see throughout the book of Malachi is that God is trying to expose the depth of Israel's sin—He shows them way after way after way that they have sinned against Him. He wants to show them that they have rejected Him in almost every area of their lives. He is laying forth a laundry list of sorts to give them a general picture of how far they have fallen—to show them how deserving of judgment they have become.

Malachi 3:7-12

Notice what God says to the Israelites in vs. 7.

“Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of Hosts.

What we find here is that even at the height of Israel's rebellion against God, God lays before them the possibilities of forgiveness, restoration, pardon, and blessings unspeakable. What Grace! He invites them, “Return to Me, and I will return to you.” At the same time, however, we must understand that this invitation to “return to God” is more than just an invitation; it is a command. God's invitations are always invitations/commands. Only finite, sinful, depraved creatures would spurn their Creator's invitations. Really, God is setting forth them a conditional blessing. God desires a relationship with His people. However, He can only relate with sinners on His terms. He will not budge or bend or stretch His standards or conditions for our sake. This does not mean that He does not love us, but it does mean that He is just as holy and just as He is loving and merciful. This is ultimately evident in the death of Christ. Even when His own and only Son, Jesus Christ, bore sin, God did not simply overlook it. If there were ever a time when you think God would bend or stretch his standards or conditions it would be with His one and only Son.

God is laying forth a conditional promise. If the Israelites return to Him, He will return to them. But, if they do not return to Him, He will not return to them. The main point: God does not go halves with sinners. It is either “His way or the highway.” He does not meet sinners halfway. “God, I will accommodate you if you accommodate me!” No, He will only receive you if come to Him on His terms, under His conditions, in the way that He has prescribed. Thus, in this passage we hear in the voice of God both a

pleading and a stern warning. He wants relationship with His people, but He will not bend or compromise His standards and conditions to attain that relationship.

What does God mean when He says, “return to me”? He means, “Come to Me in the way that I have prescribed in My word.” The Israelites are not coming to Him in the way that God has revealed in His word. And He shows them exactly how they have failed to come to Him on His terms.

How have they failed to come to Him on His terms? Well, the Israelites ask God that same question.

But you ask: "How can we return?"

As usual, the Israelites are blind to their own sin. They have become so spiritually dull that they couldn't recognize the sin in their life if it hit them in the face. I am not sure if this question is genuine or antagonistic on their part. Either way, one thing is clear—the Israelites have no sensitivity to God and His word.

God then answers their question in the next part of the verse.

Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me!

God accuses them of robbing Him! To which they, once again, question His accusation against them.

You ask: "How do we rob You?"

Once again their lack of spiritual sensitivity is remarkable. Even when pressed they cannot see their sin. He then lays it forth for them in a straightforward way.

[By not making the payments] of 10 percent and the contributions.

Ultimately, their sin is wrapped up in their misunderstanding of where their goodies come from. As we often do, the Israelites thought that their possessions (whether it be money, talents, abilities, homes, or whatever) were theirs, and that God had no right to tell them what to do with it. We live this way often times as well. We tend to think that our money is ours to do whatever we want with; our bodies are ours to do whatever we want with; our houses are ours to do whatever we want to with; our voices are ours to do whatever we want to with. We live in a society that worships freedom at the cost of everything else. Ultimately, however, God is our King. Everything we have is God's, and it is nothing less than robbery to use what He has given us in whatever way we want regardless of what He says or thinks. What we find when we read the word of God, though, is that our money, abilities, and things are not ultimately ours. Everything we have has been given to us by God, and thus He can tell us what to do with our money, things, and body. Paul even suggests that our very bodies are not our own.

19 Do you not know that your body is a sanctuary of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body. (1 Corinthians 6:19-20)

The fact is that God commanded the Israelites to give a “tenth part” (which is where the word “tithe” comes from). You have to understand as well that the tithes were in many ways similar to what taxes are for us. God set Israel up as His political, national people. How was the temple kept up; how did the priests eat; how did the Israelites take care of the poor in their midst? Through the tithes and offerings. The priests went hungry if the people failed to bring what God had commanded of them. If we stop paying our taxes the conditions of the roads will decline, our congressman will not be able to put as much time and energy into representing us, the condition of our state will rapidly decline. So it was with Israel. We must remember that the temple and the priestly system was the epicenter of Israelite culture. The nation of Israel was meant to be a nation which found its identity in the God which led them. When the nation stopped tithing, their nation was unable to continue to do and be what God had designed for them to do. Tithes had the same effect as taxes. The big difference being (for the most part) that the Israelites tithed the produce of the ground as opposed to mint coins and dollars. They tithed the product of their trade (sort of like Indians). The priests would then live off a portion of the tithe that was brought to the temple.

Their lack of tithing evidenced the fact that they did not believe that their abundance was solely due to the hand of God. If they realized that it was God who blessed them with what they had, they would have had no problem giving back to Him a portion of what He blessed them with. Their thinking would have went as such, “Well, if God was able to give me this much, surely He will provide for me if I give Him back some of what he has given me (as He promised).” However, when you think that your abundance is from your own hard work, as opposed to being from God’s hard work, you will find giving God your money to be quite difficult. Why? Because in your mind God is not the giver, you are the giver. You give yourself or earn for yourself money through your hard work. Thus, if your hope is ultimately in your ability to work hard enough to make ends meet, as opposed to being in the goodness of the God who owns the cattle on a thousand hills, you will be reluctant to give. But if you see God as the work horse behind your earning, you will give to Him freely knowing that it is his to give back and bless.

God did not need the tithes of the Israelites—He has no needs. However, He expected the Israelites to pay tithes primarily for the sake of being a continual reminder that all of their abundance was owing to Him. God is the one who gives the increase and thus to disobey Him by not giving Him the tenth that he demanded was stealing from Him. In essence, therefore, the Israelites were taking the possessions that He had given them and were using them in ways that He did not prescribe. Imagine if I were to ask you to loan me \$10,000 to buy a much needed car, and then used that money to go on vacation in Hawaii. Would that not be a form of robbery? It is not that I am necessarily taking money from you. No... you gave it to me. But you gave it to me for the purpose of buying a car and not for blowing it on a vacation. This is much the same as the situation in Malachi.

God wanted the Israelites to know that their bounty was owing to the goodness of God. This is partly why we have the Sabbath commandment—the Israelites were to trust God by not doing any work. In fact, God set forth a commandment in Leviticus 25:1-7 that the Israelites were to not work the ground at all every seventh year. They were to

trust the providing hand of God on the seventh year. This is ultimate trust—resting in the fact that God is the giver of all things.

Tithing in the New Testament

I want to deal with the issue of tithing in the New Testament. Many pastors will point their people to Malachi 3:8 and say, “See, God commands that you give a tenth of your income to the church.” However, I do not believe that Malachi 3:8 should be the decisive text that a pastor point to for the purpose of teaching about the believer’s responsibility in giving to God. Ultimately, Malachi 3:8 is a command given to the Israelites as a nation. The tithe was a tax of sorts used for the temple, the priests, the needy—it was given for the general well-being of the nation of Israel as the national people of God.

What we find in the New Testament is that the ‘tithe’ standard for giving is far too low. Turn with me to 2 Corinthians 8. In this passage we find Paul pleading the saints in Corinth to financially contribute to the poor saints in Jerusalem. It must be mentioned, thus, that this passage does not speak to the issue of tithing to your local church, per se. So first of all let it be known that the NT Scriptures do not lay forth any specific instructions in regard to how the individual Christian is to give to their individual assembly. This passage is directed at giving to a group of Christians who lived quite a distance from Corinth, and this is not directed at how the individual believer is to give to their specific local church. However, I do believe that we can gain some helpful insights about our responsibility in giving in the NC era.

1. First of all we see in 2 Corinthians 8:7 that giving is a gift that can be worked at and excelled in.

Now as you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in all diligence, and in your love for us—excel also in this grace.

You don’t find much in the OT about the exhortation to “excel” in the grace of giving. However, this is an exhortation from Paul. Thus, to measure the believer’s responsibility in giving by a percentage (whether it be 10% or whatever), is to lower the standard set by Paul.

You see, people want a standard to measure themselves with. But what we find in the New Covenant is that spirituality and obedience is not measured by strict adherence to a certain standard or percentage. In the New Covenant, the measure of true spirituality and obedience is measured by how much you walk in the Spirit. Thus, the New Testament protects against any self-righteousness that one might gain by giving more than 10%. You may be giving 60% of your income and yet be displeasing to God about it.

Let me state the giving principle as such: if you are not actively working at excelling at the grace of giving, you are probably not giving as much as you should be.

2. Second, we see in 2 Cor 8:8 that our giving is a direct reflection of how much we love.

I am not saying this as a command. Rather, by means of the diligence of others, I am testing the genuineness of your love.

In other words, genuine love is a love which gives. Genuine love is a love that does not hoard while another starves. Genuine love is completely practical (as opposed to theoretical or merely sentimental). You can give all of your money and yet not love (1 Corinthians 13:3), but you cannot love without giving to fellow believers in need within reason if you have the ability. Look with me at 1 John 3:16-17.

16 This is how we have come to know love: He laid down His life for us. We should also lay down our lives for our brothers. 17 If anyone has this world's goods and sees his brother in need but shuts off his compassion from him—how can God's love reside in him?

Let this text bite you in the bottom. Follow the logic of 1 John closely: the largest evidence that a person has genuine saving faith is love for God, and love for God is ultimately evidenced through obedience to His commandments, and God's commandments are summed up in one commandment, "Love your neighbor as yourself." And love for the brethren is most evidenced through meeting practical needs. Do you follow God's logic? This is the logic of 1 John.

3. Third, we see in 2 Cor 8:9 that Jesus is the supreme example of how much we are to give. Jesus did not give 10% of Himself—He gave us all of Himself. He is our standard.

For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ: although He was rich, for your sake He became poor, so that by His poverty you might become rich.

With Jesus as our supreme example we must never feel that we are being obedient to the Lord just because we give a certain amount or percent. Our ultimate example of giving is the one who left the infinite glories of heaven for the sake of dying our death (as undeserving sinners) so that we might be co-inheritors in His infinite glory with Him. He gave us His all, and He is our standard. If you have never sacrificed anything for the sake of another's poverty or ministry you may have reason to question whether you are living up to the example set forth for you by Jesus.

4. Fourth, we see in 2 Cor 9:7 that a person is to give what the Spirit leads them to give, and to do so with cheerfulness.

Each person should do as he has decided in his heart—not out of regret or out of necessity, for God loves a cheerful giver.

In other words, there are no formulas for deciding how much to give. You are to give as you have ability, and as the Lord leads. We also see in this passage that when you give you must give cheerfully. In other words, don't give out of necessity, nor in a begrudging, lifeless way. Your giving should be done out of the overflow of what has been given you in Christ.

We must understand that giving in the NT is the believer's response to what God has given you in Christ. You must always be in constant prayer, seeking the Lord in regard to how much you give. You must never set a dollar amount and coast. The Spirit leads the believer (and church) in this way.

5. The poor are not exempt from giving liberally as they have ability. See 2 Cor 8:1-3.

We want you to know, brothers, about the grace of God granted to the churches of Macedonia: 2 during a severe testing by affliction, their abundance of joy and their deep poverty overflowed into the wealth of their generosity. 3 I testify that, on their own, according to their ability and beyond their ability, 4 they begged us insistently for the privilege of sharing in the ministry to the saints.

They gave out of the depth of their poverty. What a thought! Notice in vs. 4 that they begged Paul for the “privilege” of giving.

6. We must never judge another for how much they give or do not give. Ultimately, each believer must give an account before God in regard to how much they give. **The poor seem to judge the rich in regard to percentages, while the rich tend to judge the poor in regard to dollar amounts.** The poor must not look begrudging upon the rich who may not give as much as one would expect. Often times the thought goes as such, “You should be giving more than 10% of your income because you make so much money.” There was a teacher at one of the colleges I went to who owned both a brand new Jaguar and a newer Porsche. One of my friends said, “It is sinful that he would own two expensive status-symbol cars. Look at how much money he could have given to missions if he would have bought two blue-collar cars.” We were in his dorm room at the time, so I went over to his closet and began to count all of his clothes (4 pairs of khaki pants, 3 pairs of jeans, 4 button up shirts, 2 suit coats, 2 pairs of slacks, 7 t-shirts, 1 pair of tennis shoes, 2 pairs of dress shoes, a pair of flip flops, and a pair of slippers). This is just what was in his closet! I then said, “Do you really need all of these clothes? Oh, and by the way, did you buy these clothes at the good will or did you get them at a retail store? Do you know how much money you could have saved if you wouldn’t have sinfully indulged in your wardrobe?” I continued, “Until you sell at least half of your wardrobe and give it to missions, I really have difficulty not seeing you as a hypocrite.”

You see, we all splurge. We all have running water (which we don’t need), we all have electricity (which we don’t need), we all have TVs (which we don’t need), and all of us have diets that are considered unreasonable by many in most parts of the world. We drink expensive coffee, expensive soda, and we pay for internet and cable. All of these things we do not need. I am not here to say that the rich should be irresponsible with their money. No! The rich should give as the Spirit directs. But the poor should not stand as their judge in regard to how the rich or wealthy, or well off use the money that God has given them. The rich will have to give an account for how they used their money. God is the judge. And everyone listening within ear shot is in that number, we are all relatively rich according to the world’s standards. This does not mean that the rich can just sit back and say, “Don’t judge me!” No, because the rich ought to seek to be led by the Spirit in how much they give.

Second, the rich must not judge the poor in regard to how much they give. Look at what Jesus said in Luke 21:1-4;

He looked up and saw the rich dropping their offerings into the temple treasury. 2 He also saw a poor widow dropping in two tiny coins. 3 "I tell you the

truth," He said. "This poor widow has put in more than all of them. 4 For all these people have put in gifts out of their surplus, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.

Poor folks need to be careful here, because they will miss the point of Jesus' saying. Jesus did not praise this woman simply because she gave her money as a poor woman. He praised her for giving all that she had. Many poor people have the tendency to feel that they are super spiritual because they give at all. And they give little because the poor woman gave little. Yet, the poor woman was praise *only* because she gave all that she had.

But the rich must not look down on the poor for how little, in dollar amount, they give. And the rich should not expect the poor to give more of themselves in physical labor because they give smaller amounts of money. Many of the rich will say in their hearts (or worse... out loud), "I give \$20,000 to this church every year, and therefore I shouldn't feel the burden to scrub the floors in the bathroom." Sometimes there is even a tendency for the rich to feel that they have more decision making power in the church because they have invested more into it than the rest. I hate to state the obvious, but this reasoning is nothing less than the epitome of worldliness.

Some of the rich, some of the poor, and some of the blue collar will definitely abuse what Jesus says. Some of the rich will give their measly little percentage amount thinking themselves to be super spiritual for their dollar amount while some of the poor give their small amount without really sacrificing because they know they can get away with it, while the blue collar has the temptation to go either way.

Lastly, let it be known that if you feel burdened to give, give out of your own means. Do not be afraid to tell others of how the Lord has burdened you to give financially, but do not lay your burdens upon other believers. And never help others with the resources of others—if you want to help someone in need, help them with your own means, and if you lack ability trust that the Lord will provide through other means.

Conclusion

Ultimately, Malachi 3:8 should not be our standard in giving because we have been given a new standard; that of Christ Jesus. Jesus gave 100% of Himself for us.

Excurses: More on Coming to God on His Terms

God's 'My way or the highway' invitations are often times seen as unappealing in today's culture. In this passage we see God's desire to be in relationship with His people Israel. However, God is not the sort of God who can simply just have company with sinners. So often God is communicated as some sort of a soft and fluffy being who will go to any length to get as many people to follow Him as possible. Although the Scriptures do speak of God as a God of infinite love, mercy, and compassion, however, to only speak of God in these terms paints a misleading picture of the God of the Bible. What we see is that the God of the Bible does desire to reconcile Himself with all men (2 Peter 3:9), and He does invite all men to come to Himself (Matthew 11:28); however, the

Bible suggests that God will only relate with sinful, fallen human being if they come to him on His terms, fulfilling the conditions that He has set.

As stated last week, God cannot have company with sin. In fact, it is right to say that God hates sin (Proverbs 15-16). Sin contaminates who God is at the core of His being, and thus although yes He does greatly desire relationship with human beings, He will only relate with them if they come to Him on his terms. In this way He is much like the president. In order to make it into the White House to hang out with the president you have get the proper security clearance, you have to leave all of your knives, tazers, and guns at the door; you have to wear the security badge that they give you (and you must take it off for nothing); you cannot just invite whomever you want to come with you; you have to be properly clothed, and you must not be late. This is not to say that God is some sort of a stuffy formalist, but it is to say that God cannot just up and have relationship with sinners. Thus although he does call and invite all men to unto Himself, He makes it very clear that they can only come in the way that He has prescribed.

What we find in the New Testament is that the only way that God allows you to relate with Him is through His Son, Jesus. You can have all the religion in the world, but if you do not come to Him in Christ, you will not find God. You may be the smartest, the richest, the humblest, the contritest,¹ the nicest, the funniest, the friendliest, or even the most righteous, but if you do not come to God in the way that He has prescribed (through faith in Jesus Christ), you will find yourself unable to get even one foot in the door.

Some may look at this and conclude that God must be some sort of an unreasonable prude or that he is some sort of a bull-headed dictator. This is especially the case for us who live in the land of the free. In America we tend to think that there are always exceptions to the rule, and that it is the job of the producers to adapt and adjust their product to our unique figure and needs. We tend to carry this over into our relationship with God, thinking that God is bound to be flexible enough to meet us half way. We reason; "I will adjust a *few* things in my life to accommodate Him and in return He can adjust a *few* things in His conditions to accommodate me."

The horrible error in this sort of thinking, however, is that it fails to recognize the great chasm that exists between us and God. God is not just some other producer out to sell us spiritual goods. No! He is the creator of all that is. He is not our equal. And he does not need our services to keep his boat afloat. In fact, he is perfectly happy and sufficiently satisfied without us. This, of course, does not mean that God does not desire a relationship with us, or that He could care less about us. In fact, that is the glory of it all! If there ever were a person could get away with being careless about us and our eternal state it would a being/person of God's stature and credential, and yet He has invited us to Himself (provided that we come on His terms). When we come face to face with God we must in the least conclude with the Psalmist:

When I observe Your heavens, the work of Your fingers, the moon and the stars, which You set in place, what is man that You remember him, the son of man that You look after him? (Psalm 8:3-4)

¹ Yes, "contritest" is a word... a word that I just made up.

God is not out there with a product that he will do anything to sell. Rather, God is a God who has done the unthinkable: He has attempted relationship with fallen, sinful human beings. Just even the thought of God giving us a thought is one thing.

If you were to send a card of congratulations to Tiger Woods for winning the *Bridgestone Invitational* two weeks ago, do you think he would say, “Ahh... that Jimmy Snowden, what a nice guy.”? Do you think he would give your letter of congratulations a second thought? Of course not! There would only be about .05% chance that he would even see the letter (he has secretaries and personal assistants who read his mail for him, sifting the important letters from the unimportant—and I hate to break it to you, but your letter would go in the unimportant pile). Tiger Woods is one of the most influential people in the world. He is too important and too big on the world scene to give insignificant people like you and I a thought. And yet, what we find in Psalm 8 is that God—the One who is infinite in all of His ways; the one who not only taught Tiger Woods everything he knows about golf, but actually created him, **and** the grass upon which he plays, **and** the sun which beats upon his head, **and** the vast universe in which he is virtually not just unknown, but unseen. This God has taken us into consideration. Not only is that the case, but this God did the double unthinkable: He became one of His own creatures (fully God and fully man in Christ Jesus) to die in our place.

And yet we humans still assert our authority to God, putting demands upon Him, expecting Him to adjust his conditions and expectations to our liking. The thing we fail to realize is that He is not obligated to do anything for us. God was not obligated to send His Son. The only thing that drove Him to do so was His own sovereign love. After all, God did not pursue a restored relationship with the angels who had fallen—He didn’t send them a redeemer (2 Peter 2:4). This is actually quite remarkable. Angels are much bigger, greater, and more prominent than us. They are much more significant than we human beings. And yet God sent a redeemer to us, but not to them. God was not obligated to do anything for us, and yet He did.

How on earth could we consider it nothing less than the very height of arrogant presumption² to expect God to adjust and conform His conditions/expectations to our liking or convenience? Simply put, is it not enough that He would pursue us at all? Shouldn’t the very thought of His thinking of us drive us to a posture of humility and unworthiness? Should it not leave us questioning with Casting Crowns, “Who am I?” Who am I that God would pursue me; Who am I that God would not leave me to myself; Who am I that God would invite me to come to Himself at all; Who am I that God would give me any conditions upon which I can be made right with Him; who am I that God would go to the very ends of the earth to call me out of my sin unto Himself; who am I that God would Himself become poor for the sake of remedying my poverty (2 Corinthians 8:9)?

It is not a prudish, bull-headed move on God’s part to demand that we come to Him on His terms alone. To even consider such a thought reveals an embarrassingly high view of oneself. As Paul says in Romans 9:20

“But who are your—anyone who talks back to God? Will what is formed say to the one who formed it, ‘Why did you make me like this?’”

² www.dicionary.com defines presumption as “unwarrantable, unbecoming, or impertinent boldness.”

The Gospel is God's gracious call to us to come to Him on His terms. How dare we humans stick our fingers in the face of the all-glorious king of the universe who has left his heavenly throne to come to pursue us in our sin, blaming him for not meeting us halfway.

One of the reasons why Christianity is so weak in America today is because although we preach the bigness of God, the glory of God—although our preaching oftentimes leaves people with an unspeakable awe about how big and glorious God is, our preaching never leaves man with an unspeakable awe about how small and insignificant we humans are. This is the glorious Gospel; that the incomprehensibly big and glorious God has done the triple unthinkable—He has come to die for and rescue us incomprehensibly small and insignificant creatures. We get it! God is big; He is huge, He is unspeakably enormous. But do we really grasp our insignificance, our smallness? We should be so overwhelmed by the glory and grandeur of the God who is pursuing us that we would automatically say in our hearts, “Of course he will only receive me if I come on his terms.” Creators don't meet their creatures half way. This is not an indication of God being a control freak, it is the result of an infinitely glorious God doing the unspeakable—pursuing sinful, finite beings. Of course he is only going to receive us on His terms.