

Questioning God's Provision

A Study of Malachi 3:7-12

Characteristic of Completeness: Stewardship

Big Idea: Put your best to the test.

Related Scriptures: 1 Kings 17:8-16; Proverbs 3:5-10; 11:24; Haggai 1:1-11; Matthew 6:25-33; Luke 6:38; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5; 9:1-15; Philippians 4:14-20

Introduction:

- A. (Play video, "money rant" here. It should play automatically.)
- B. In our study through the book of Malachi, today we come to passage about money or possessions. More specifically, it's about stealing from God. The passage is ► Malachi 3:7-12.

Some of you may notice that I'm skipping ahead a little in the book of Malachi; I haven't yet covered Malachi 2:7 through 3:6. Don't worry; I'll do that next Sunday.

- C. We're going to see from our text today that the Israelites were stealing from God. They apparently didn't think of it as stealing. But God did. And we can learn from their mistake. You see, it's quite possible that we, too, are stealing from God and we aren't even aware of it. How can you tell? How do you know if you're stealing from God? Well, let's go to school on the Israelites.
- I. Malachi ► 3:7-8 records God bringing the charge of stealing against the Israelites. He says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:7 "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. . . ."

The Israelites were robbing God. You ask, "How did they rob God?" Well that's what the Israelites wanted to know. They were oblivious. In the middle part of ► Verse 8, God says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:8 ". . . But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' . . ."

Then, God gives the answer in the last part of ► Verse 8. He says He is being robbed . . .

^{ESV} Malachi 3:8 ". . . In your tithes and contributions."

God says, in effect, "You are stealing my money. You are withholding your tithes and contributions from me."

- A. What tithes and contributions is God talking about? Well, at the same time God gave the Ten Commandments through Moses, He also gave many other instructions to the Israelites, including how to give money for His work. All of these instructions are collectively referred to as the “statutes” in Verse 7 of our text.
- B. The Old Testament Hebrew word translated, ► “tithe” literally means a tenth or 10%. That’s where some people get the idea that giving 10% is a biblical norm.

But there were actually ► several tithes that were mandatory for the ancient Jew. Let’s add them up. There was one tithe called ► the Levites’ tithe to be given each year.¹ That’s 10% annually. There was a second tithe called ► the festival tithe to be given each year.² That’s another 10% annually, so now we’re up to 20% in total. There was a third tithe called ► the poor tithe that was to be given every third year.³ That works out to an average of 3.3% per year, so we’re up to about 23% annually in required tithes.

Beyond the tithes, there was a kind of mandatory profit-sharing whereby the Israelites were commanded to leave the corners of their fields unharvested so that the poor could come and glean food from the unharvested portions. The amount was not specified as a percentage, but it would have perhaps ► constituted 2% of the total crop annually. Add that to the tithes, and ► the total mandatory giving for the Israelites was around 25% of their gross income.

- C. Then there were ► the “contributions” on top of that. The contributions ► were voluntary and were to be given over and above the mandatory 25% base. The voluntary giving of ► the first fruits of one’s crop to God is an example.⁴ Free will offerings were also given for ► special projects such as the building of the tabernacle.⁵
- D. Let’s try to translate the tithes and contributions into today’s terms, just for fun. Let’s say your household income is \$100,000. You’d give a mandatory \$25,000 to the church. Then maybe the church needs a new roof and a new building and so, maybe you’d voluntarily give another \$10,000 on top of that. So, for tax purposes, you’d get a little statement from the church in January, saying, “Thank you for giving \$35,000 to the church.” That’s what it would be like to be an ancient Jew. And if we all did that, we’d have a \$17,500,000 annual budget at Moon Valley!⁶
- E. You may recall from an earlier study in Malachi that God wants our best, not our leftovers. So, the tithes and contributions to which God refers in Malachi 3:8 represent His plan for every Israelite to give the best of their possessions: a 25% mandatory base,

¹ Leviticus 27:30-33; Numbers 18:21-32.

² Deuteronomy 12:1-19; 14:22-27.

³ Deuteronomy 14:28-29; 26:12-15.

⁴ Exodus 23:19.

⁵ Exodus 25.

⁶ \$35,000 X 500 givers = \$17,500,000.

plus voluntary contributions on top of that. That's God's money. And that's a chunk of change! And in disobedience, the Israelites were just not giving it. Not fully. So God calls them on the carpet for stealing from Him.

II. Then God gives the dire consequences of this stealing. He says in ► Verse 9,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:9 “You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.”

What's the curse that God is talking about here? How are the Israelites cursed as a result of their failure to give? Well, the Mosaic Law, including the tithes and contributions, was a part of something called the Mosaic Covenant. It was a covenant or deal between God and the nation of Israel. As part of the Mosaic Covenant, God essentially said to the Israelites, “Here are my laws. If you obey them, I'll bless you with good things. If you disobey them, I'll curse you with bad things. Do it My way and enjoy the benefits. Or, do it your way and suffer the consequences. That's the deal between you and Me.”⁷

The Israelites knew about the deal. They agreed to the Mosaic Covenant. Which raises the question, why would they choose not to give what God required at the risk of getting the curses? The text in Malachi suggests that the Israelites thought that they just couldn't afford it. They thought that if they gave the required tithes and contributions—the 25% plus—that their own needs would go unmet. I imagine many of them thought, “I'd really like to give more. I really would. But, I just can't afford it. I don't see how that could work. If I gave that much, I'd go under. I just couldn't make it.”

In essence, the Israelites were questioning God's provision. They just couldn't quite believe that, if they gave their best, God would take care of them.

III. But God challenges the Israelites to put their best to the test. Listen to what God says, beginning in ► Malachi 3:10. He says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:10 “Bring the full tithes 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.”

Here, the Lord is challenging the Israelites to test Him in a good way. They were afraid to give as much as the Lord required, but the Lord says, “Test Me on this. If you'll hang it out there for Me, I'll come through for you. Try it. You'll see. Give the full amount I'm telling you to give—

⁷ Some of the blessings and curses stipulated in the Mosaic Covenant are listed in Deuteronomy 28-30.

give your best—and I will pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. You’ve got to trust me on this. Put your best to the test.”

- IV. How ► can we learn from the Israelites? Is this where I tell you that you need to give over 25% to the church or else God is going to get you? No. That’s not the lesson. I’ve made the case previously that Christians are no longer under the Mosaic Law. The Mosaic Covenant was struck with Israel, not us, and the Law within it has been superseded by Christ. So, the prescribed tithes and contributions of the Law no longer apply directly to us. Therefore, God will not bring charges against us for stealing tithes and contributions.

Whew! We can all breathe a big sigh of relief. Right?

Not exactly. We can still steal from God. In fact, stealing may even be more common among God’s people today than it was back then. Let’s look at some timeless principles that continue to apply to us.

- A. First of all, God’s people have always been managers, not owners. That was true for the Israelites; it’s still true for believers today. We’re managers, not owners. This is a revolutionary, countercultural idea that will change your whole outlook on money.

1. The very fact that God commanded certain tithes and contributions in the Old Testament presupposes His ownership. He owns it all, including money, and He gave specific instructions on what to do with a sizeable portion of it through tithes and contributions. Psalm ► 24:1 acknowledges God’s ownership saying,

^{ESV} Psalm 24:1 The earth is the LORD’s and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein

We’re managers, not owners.

2. Over ► in the New Testament, God ownership of everything, including money, hasn’t changed a bit. Followers of Jesus in the early church repeatedly speak of themselves as bond-servants of Christ—bond-servants who have been purchased by His sacrifice.⁸ Bond-servants have no rights of ownership, only responsibilities—responsibilities to manage that which is entrusted to them by the Master who bought them and owns them. In ► 1 Corinthians 6:19-20, Paul explains,

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 6:19 Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you, whom you have from God? You are not your own, 20 for you were bought with a price. So glorify God in your body.

⁸ Romans 1:1; James 1:1; 2 Peter 1:1; Revelation 1:1.

We're managers, not owners.

3. So then, ► financial management for the Christian boils down to one question: What does God want me to do with His money that He has entrusted to me? For us, money is a matter of stewardship, not ownership. In fact, that's our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week: stewardship. If you want to become complete in Christ, you must become a good steward or good manager of the things God has entrusted to your care, believing that you're a manager, not an owner.
- B. What about the percentages? In all the New Testament, tithing is never commanded at all by anybody. In fact, I can't find biblical support for any mandatory percentage in giving that applies to the believer today. Does that mean that God isn't interested in how much we give? No. He's still interested in how much we give. It's just that the way in which God directs us has changed. As managers and not owners, our job is to figure out what God wants us to do with His money. Our responsibility is no longer to give by the dictates of the Law, but by the dictates of our hearts in response to God. With respect to giving, Paul says in ► 2 Corinthians 9:7,

^{ESV} 2 Corinthians 9:7 Each one must give as he has made up his mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

So, our responsibility is no longer to give according to law-imposed percentages, but according to heartfelt perceptions of what God wants us to do with His money. The criterion is no longer external, but internal.

In a way, I suppose this makes it easier to steal from God. It's easier to steal because no one else can tell when you're stealing. In the Old Testament, if you weren't coughing up at least 25%, other people would know you were stealing. Nowadays, others can't tell if you're stealing because amounts and percentages tell us little or nothing about your heart. For example, you may be giving 2% of your income to the church, and that might be exactly what God has directed you to do; no one else can tell. On the other hand, you may be giving 30% to the church and stealing because God wants you to give 50% right now. It's between you and God; no one else can tell.

Sometimes this can be frustrating. How do you know what God wants you to give? Sometimes it seems like it would be a whole lot easier if God just gave us percentages again so we could know for sure. But, as I thought about that prospect, it occurred to me that a return to percentages may take the relational aspect right out of giving. I think God wants our giving to be borne out of our relationship with Him. I think God wants us to ask Him what He wants us to do with His money. Not just once or twice, but continually, in close relationship. If we make it a practice to regularly ask God for guidance in giving, He'll give it. But, here's ► the question: Are you asking?

We also need to listen for God's response when we pray. It doesn't do much good to ask if we don't listen for the answer. God has never spoken to me audibly, but He does speak to us through His Word in the Bible, through circumstances, through other people, and through the heartfelt prompting of the Holy Spirit. But, here's ► the question: Are you listening? Are you listening for what God may be saying to you? I believe the mandated percentages of the Old Testament have been replaced with asking and listening in the New. Your responsibility as a believer and manager is to ask and listen.

The Israelites give us an example of being hard of hearing. They ignored an obvious circumstance where giving was needed. After the Israelites had returned to their land from Babylonian exile, they fixed up their own houses, but not their place of worship, the house of God, the temple. As a result, many were living in very nice paneled houses, while the house of God was a deteriorated mess. So God asks them a question through the prophet Haggai. Haggai 1:3-4 ► records it:

^{NAU} Haggai 1:3 Then the word of the LORD came by Haggai the prophet, saying,
4 "Is it time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses while this house *lies* desolate?"

In effect, God is saying, "You people are living in some very nice houses, but your place of worship—my house—is a dump. What's up with that? Is that not a selfish misappropriation of the resources I've entrusted to you?"

If you're not asking God to guide your distribution of His money, and if you're not listening for His reply, then you're probably stealing. I know that seems pretty blunt, maybe so blunt you're wondering if you heard it right. Let me say it again. If you're not asking God to guide your distribution of His money, and if you're not listening for His reply, then you're probably stealing. How can it be otherwise? If you're ignoring what God wants you to do with His money, then you are almost certainly misappropriating it. Even if you are dutifully but mindlessly giving the socially admirable 10% to charities, you may be on the take. God may want more, or He may want you to redirect it. All the while, you may be ignoring Him, stealing away His money from His intended uses.

- C. If ► you are stealing from God, are you then subject to the same curses the Israelites were for stealing God's money? Not exactly. Strictly speaking, we are not a party to the Mosaic Covenant; therefore, we are not subject to its penalties.

Whew! We can all breathe a big sigh of relief. Right? Not exactly.

Stealing from God still carries negative consequences in this life and the life to come. When you rip off God, you end up ripping off yourself. God may withhold His blessing from you in this life. And when this life is over, the Bible says that all believers will appear before the Lord to give an account for what we have done on earth. I believe

that one of the things for which we will need to give an account is how we managed God's money. We will then experience gain or loss of reward based on our stewardship.

- D. Well, how about the test? Remember God challenged the Israelites to test Him—to give fully and see that they can't out-give God. He will provide for those who give fully and obediently. Does that still apply today? Yes, it does. Let me show you. You may be familiar with ► Philippians 4:19. We studied it just a couple of months ago. It says:

^{ESV} Philippians 4:19 And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

This is a wonderful promise. But, many people don't realize it's actually a promise directly tied to giving. In context, Paul is talking about the giving of the Philippians. In essence, Paul is saying, "Because you Philippians gave according to God's design—sacrificially, freely, cheerfully, expectantly—God, in turn, will supply all your needs." You can't claim the promise without the premise.

Here's the idea: If you're *not* giving as God intends—if you're *not* giving as the Philippians did—you have no right to ask God to supply your financial needs based on Philippians 4:19. God is not promising to take care of the needs of believers who are lazy or irresponsible or stingy.

On the other hand, if you are a believer in Jesus Christ who is giving your best as God intends, you do have every right to expect God to meet your financial needs, claiming Philippians 4:19 as His promise to you.

The ► big idea of my message is this: Put your best to the test.

Now, I want to be clear that I am *not* joining ranks with the people on religious TV who claim that all you need to do is give them money so that you can get money. The biblical idea is this: Give as God intends, and He will take care of you, both in this life and in the life to come. Put your best to the test.

Perhaps the Philippians needed this assurance and encouragement because the people of the church at Philippi were very poor. Many were probably out of work, barely getting by, financially strapped, scraping the bottom of the barrel. In the wake of God's prompting to give to Paul, they gave fully. But they were human. Some of the Philippians may have entertained the same kinds of questions the Israelites asked. They're the same kinds of questions that we ask. "Can I afford this? How in the world is this going to work? Am I going to go under? How am I going to make it?"

God ► says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:10 “. . . put me to the test . . . if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”

Put your best to the test.

This week, I invite you to pray this prayer, with which I will end this message:

Lord, all that I have is Yours. Thank You for trusting me to manage Your stuff. How much of it do you want me to give away for the benefit of others? What would be my best in Your eyes? Please show me, because I am willing to put my best to the test.