

RESTORING WHAT'S BEEN WASTED AND PRESERVING WHAT IS YET TO BE - Malachi 3:6-12 - "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. [7] From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?' [8] Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. [9] You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. [10] Bring the full 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."

1) THE INVITATION IN THE MIDDLE OF THE REBUKE - Malachi 3:6-7 - "For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. [7] From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'"

a) *There has been consistent rebellion from the people of God.* Even from the days of Abraham the people have never had a consistent heart to follow God.

Stephen, in his message to the Jewish Sanhedrin, made reference to this same fact - Acts 7:51-51 - "You stiff-necked people, uncircumcised in heart and ears, you always resist the Holy Spirit. As your fathers did, so do you."

So the Lord says, through Malachi, "There never has been a time when you seemed to be serious about following me. You never did seem to love Me with all your heart. 'You always resist the Holy Spirit'"

What do you do with people like that? What would be in your heart toward people like that? And it's right at this point that I want you to see exactly what God has revealed about his own heart toward people like that. "The reason you're not destroyed in a blinding, white-hot fit of holy rage is that I haven't changed in my undying love and commitment toward you."

What He says to each of these people is a very simple invitation. "Return to me! I'll return to you right this minute if you'll just return to me. Some things you can't do over. Some opportunities are lost. But if you will start now it's not too late. Come home to me. I'll return to you."

This is the glory of the gospel. This is the beauty of knowing our God. In the middle of telling the absolute truth about holiness and sin - while the standard is held high - it is never used to club the repentant. The Bible never just says "Here's your sin!" It says, "There is a way back. Return to Me. It's not too late!"

2) HOW CAN I RETURN TO GOD? - Malachi 3:7b-10 - "...But you say, 'How shall we return?' [8] Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. [9] You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. [10] Bring the full 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."

Now, we know from the rest of the book that these are people who have rebelled against the Lord in many different ways. There were all sorts of moral failures, sexual sins, crimes against the poor, compromise in their worship, false idolatry, etc. If one of these people came to you - if you were their pastor - and they said, "What should I do to begin to set my life in order before the Lord - How can I restore fellowship with God?" - what would you tell him?

Almost unbelievably God says, "Honor me with your whole tithe!" (3:10). Notice, God doesn't say to bow and pray - to read the law more - go to the temple more often. God says that the tithe is the starting place for these people. How can this possibly be? How can God bring up the subject of money and material possessions at this point? Why does God say the tithe is the starting place for spiritual renewal for these people? Certainly it's useful Bible teaching when the offerings are low or when we're launching a building program or expanding the staff. But how is tithing the starting place for *spiritual* renewal?

3) TITHING AND THE FALL OF MAN

Let's very quickly go over some very old truths from the early chapters of Genesis. And remember, these points come before the law was ever given - before any places of worship needed maintaining - and before any priesthood was established.

a) Genesis 1:27-28 - "So God created man in his own image, in the image of God he created him; male and female he created them. [28] And God blessed them. And God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and subdue it and have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth." Man was created by God to exercise incredible stewardship and dominion over all of God's creation. There was a tremendous

amount of joy and freedom that man was to exercise over the environment in which God had placed him.

- b) **Genesis 2:16-17** - "And the Lord God commanded the man, saying, "You may surely eat of every tree of the garden, [17] but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall surely die." Please notice that this is more than a simple eat or not eat issue. This is an issue of *recognized rights*. In effect, God was saying, "Everything within your reach is for your use and enjoyment - everything except a small portion. A small portion is not for your touch. I have reserved a small portion to be mine and mine alone."

In the garden God gives mankind a test. "*Everything else is for your own use. This one part isn't. This is mine.*" And here's the most important point of all. It simply mustn't be missed. Man's obedience in relationship to God's portion determined his successful rulership over the everything else God had given.

- c) **Genesis 3:1-5** - "Now the serpent was more crafty than any other beast of the field that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, "Did God actually say, 'You shall not eat of any tree in the garden?'" [2] And the woman said to the serpent, "We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden, [3] but God said, 'You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the midst of the garden, neither shall you touch it, lest you die.'" [4] But the serpent said to the woman, "You will not surely die. [5] For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil."

Satan convinces Eve and Eve convinces Adam that they will both be better off if they have not only their own portion of creation, but God's portion too. He convinces them that they will secure themselves better for the future if they ignore the difference between what is *God's* and what is *theirs*.

4) **WHY GOD STARTS DEALING WITH THESE PEOPLE THE WAY HE DOES**

God *begins* with their tithes because the starting place in man's *unmaking* was his failure to listen to God about what was God's alone and what was man's. When we honor God with our tithe we begin unbending, as it were, what was set askew in the fall. In honoring God with the tithe we lay the foundation, the starting place, in ordering our lives according to His will and way.

And that's not all. We lay the foundation - the starting place - for a properly exercised dominion and stewardship over the rest of our created world that we've been given "richly to enjoy!" but which will only be enjoyed on God's terms - not ours.

These words from God to His people through Malachi are ideally suited to undo so many current legalistic evangelical myths about tithing and so many of the arguments formed against it. Tithing is *not* an Old Testament legalistic ritual. It's a fundamental untangling of the threads of the fall in my life. It's not a slick plan some churches have devised for paying bills or fund raising. It's establishing God's rule into the fabric of my whole life - not just the religious part.

Tithing reveals the extent to which I grasp God's created order, the Lordship of Jesus Christ and the extent to which covetousness still reigns unchecked in my heart. And as we'll study more next week, tithing extends proper dominion and blessing over all the other areas of my life as well.