

THE BLESSING OF GOD AND THE DEVOURING FORCES OF LIFE - 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."

We spent much of last week studying verses 6 and 7 - the surprising foundation in making a return to God. We looked back into the fall of man. After all, when considering how people *return* to God it just makes sense to study what caused the foundational *separation* from God. We saw that the principle behind tithing is strikingly related to the Fall. Man lost dominion over the *whole* because he didn't obey God's instructions in the *part*. The central idea behind the tree in the center of the garden wasn't poisoned apples and witches' spells. As far as we can tell this wasn't magic fruit. God sets up *two tests* in the prohibition against eating from that tree:

- a) **First, God tests the issue of rights and authority.** Who is the Creator of everything in the garden? Adam didn't have anything by right. He brought nothing to the table. He received everything as a gift. The first text involved Adam's view of himself. If he came to see himself as the *owner* and the one *in charge* he would take matters of this material world into his own hands. In essence, that's what Eve and Adam did. By and large, we've been doing it ever since.
- b) **Second, God tests Adam and Eve's trust in His goodness and care.** Would they believe that everything would work out for their good in all of the rest of the garden if they honored God in the middle of the garden? We know that Satan convinced Eve and Adam that they would end up with *more* if they had what God had set apart. And we also know that in taking for themselves the portion God had set apart, they not only lost God's portion, but the rest of the garden as well.

But we're studying Malachi. Malachi addresses a group of people who had messed up their lives in various ways. We've studied many of them in detail. Now, they ask the question, more arrogantly than repentantly, "**How are we to return to God?**" (3:7). And the test of the garden is set up all over again. How serious are they about returning to God? How much of their lives do they want God to control? Will they keep living their lives any way they want and then come to the altar and cry their eyes out (2:13)?

There is a better way to live. There is a way that will place their lives firmly in the will and care of Father God. And so we come to verses 8-12 on the subject of tithing.

- 1) **WHAT TITHING IS ALL ABOUT** - There are scriptural truths about tithing that are basic to our understanding:
 - a) **"Tithe" means a "tenth" - Genesis 28:22** - "...and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you."

A tenth is what the word "*tithe*" means. You can't tithe 5 percent. You can't tithe fifteen percent. That's important, not in some prudish, legalistic sense, but in the sense that God always, graciously makes my obedience to Him a measurable thing.

For example, the people in Malachi's day weren't bringing the *whole* tithe in the temple. They were bringing something. But not all that God required. And the difference of their disobedience was a *measurable* difference.
 - b) **God claims the tithe as His - Leviticus 27:30** - "Every tithe of the land, whether of the seed of the land or of the fruit of the trees, is the Lord's; it is holy to the Lord."

If you've never heard it before, learn it today. The Bible says very clearly, **the tithe is the Lord's**. That's why Malachi can say that to withhold the tithe is not merely an act of selfishness, or lack of love for God. It was *definable disobedience*. It amounted to *robbery* - Malachi 3:8-9 - "Will a 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." You can see the way the prophet is pointing out the depth of wickedness in this sin. Just note the careful way in which this sin is penned in those first four words of verse 8 - "Will a man rob God?" This is not the same as a *man robbing another man*. Will a man rob *God*?
 - c) **God honors those who obey Him with the tithe - 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."

Now, it's right at this point that the teaching on tithing and prosperity sometimes gets pushed out of shape. God *does* promise

to honor those who honor Him with the tithe. That does **not** mean that I can use tithing as a magic wand - give God my tenth and then spend the rest like an idiot because God's obligated to come across and make up for any shortfall in my checking account.

In fact, this passage **tells** us how the blessing of God works. God would keep the pests from devouring their crops (11) but He wouldn't plant their crops for them. They still had to be diligent farmers. God would keep their tomatoes properly fixed to the vines. But they still had to plant tomatoes.

- d) ***Tithing is a gracious, visible aid to ordering my life properly in God's ways to best be prepared to receive God's blessing. But it is always a step of faith - Malachi 3:10-12 - "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.***

The key words are those five words in **verse 10** - **"....put me to the test...."** God **responds** to our tithe. He responds **after** we tithe. The text asks us to put **God** to the test, but actually, this is God's way of **testing us**. And what that means is tithing is **designed** to look like we can't afford to do it. It's **designed** to look like it can't possibly work. That's what that word **test** means.

Consider the Judeans being addressed in this passage. We know they weren't tithing. We know from our studies in earlier portions of the book that they were having a tough go of it materially. The crops were poor. Their lambs miscarried. There were experiencing the bitter sting of dry heavens and dusty soil. When God summoned them to bring the whole tithe into His house, what do you think went through their minds? **"Tithe? Are you crazy? Don't you see what's happening here? We can't afford to bring the whole tithe!"**

Now, strip all of our personal opinions out of the way. Look straight at the text. Why couldn't they afford to tithe? Well, there were many reasons. They were idolatrous. They were sexually immoral. They weren't honoring the Lord. In short, they were living life like they were their own bosses. They forgot they were the creatures and God was the Creator. They were taking their lives into their own hands. And it wasn't working.

And this was precisely what the act of presenting God with the tithe was designed to show them. It was a creationally established act that firmly stamped their minds with the concept of **putting God first**. And it also taught them to put God first when it wasn't **easy** to do so. That's why tithing is so important in terms of **organizing** your life around God. And it's why, with all the other things still so messed up in their lives, God told them to **start** their return to Him here.

I can put myself in the shoes of the people to whom Malachi spoke. I can easily see myself saying to God, "Fine. You want me to tithe, how about giving me a great crop. Multiply my livestock. And give me a great return on my investments. I'll be glad to offer you the tithe!"

And God says, "No, **you** test **me**, and see if I won't pour out blessing on your life. You start." Hear it this morning to the bottom of your shoes. Tithing is not God's way of subtracting anything from your life. It's one way He has ordained to increase the basic fruitfulness of your life in all of its dimensions. Tithing relates to personal fruitfulness. But you have to trust God to do that. You have to exercise faith every time you tithe.

That shouldn't surprise us. God has ordained everything in His kingdom to operate in response to faith. God's ability to **establish salvation** in my heart is dependant on my exercising faith in the death and resurrection of His Son, Jesus Christ. God **always** acts in response to faith.