

THE BOOK OF MALACHI - When Spiritual Intimacy Feels Elusive
Part 10 - Sunday, January 22nd, 2023, 5:30 p.m.
Pastor Don Horban, Cedarview Community Church, Newmarket, ON

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.”

Up to this point the book of Malachi has been an example of what we have come to call ***“strong medicine.”*** It's not the kind of book that helps you win friends and influence people. Right from the start God has reprimanded the priests of Malachi's day for tailoring a message to the taste and liking of the audience.

But now we come to a passage that shows God's love and mercy right in the middle of the people's sin and rebellion. Perhaps more than anything, these verses show what the believer's attitude to God's rebuke and correction and chastening should be. ***Why*** has God been dealing so strongly with His people? ***What*** does He desire and expect them to do?

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?'"

Two different facts are contrasted in these two verses:

- 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'"

Of course, all of this was designed to point that way toward the Gospel. A new covenant would come with new hearts. But at this point the people felt the guilt and weight of their resistance against their Creator, God.

So what does God, through the prophet Malachi, say the people should do? What do you do with people like that? What would be in **your** heart toward people like that?

- b) ***There is still an unexplainable mercy in the heart of God for these rebellious people. "The reason you're not destroyed in a blinding, white-hot fit of holy rage is that I have not changed in my undying love and commitment toward you."***

Let me make clear what I **most** want to say in this message. God's heart still hasn't changed. To people who bring half their hearts and stunted offerings to Him in worship - to people who rebel and set their hearts to question and argue with God Almighty - to people who marry pagan wives and follow in ways that desert the plan of God for their lives - to people who divorce the wife of their youth - to people in this passage who rob God of what is rightfully His in tithes - what is the Word of the Lord to people like that?

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."

"Well, Pastor Don, there's judgement for people who persist in sin like that." Yes there surely is. There's always judgment for people who refuse to repent. But that's not the only message. I want everyone hearing my voice to know that there's also another message from the Lord. No matter where you've been, you can return!

We're meant to behold the love of God - the beauty of knowing the constancy of His character. 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, idolatry, etc.

Consider this. 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?

This is very striking. You see, this is the first time that the specific subject of returning to the Lord is dealt with in this book. The people have had many questions they want directed to God but this is the first time they have asked "How are we to return to you?"

And right in the face of that specific question - 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.

So the test here is crystal clear. There's a part of the created realm that marks off the distinction between the Creator and the creature. And the test is what will man do with the part of the material realm God says is off limits to man's own discretionary use.

- 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* designated portion of God's created order, but **God's** restricted 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*.

And what we've learned from the history of mankind in God's created order is very simple. In seeking to acquire God's portion, they ended up not only losing what they thought they might *gain*, but they lost what they *had* been given as well.

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

Now we're in a better position to learn why God places tithing as the first step in His people returning to Him. And, not only returning to material prosperity (which isn't in any way the theme of Malachi's words), but their *spiritual* restoration as the people of God.

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. The creational principle behind the tithe is **not** just an Old Testament legalistic ritual or tax for funding the priesthood. The principle of the tithe **predates** all of those things. 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 reinforces 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.