

Short-Changing God

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[0 : 00] I'd be ever so grateful if you would just keep your Bibles open in front of you. Don't say anything, don't cough, it's sweltering hot, just wipe your brow and thank the Lord! My name is John, I'm a member here at the church and it's my privilege to talk this morning on tithing. We're in Malachi 3, I've entitled it Short Changing God. Have you ever thought about this? One of the hardest things in life, for any of us I think, is to see where we are wrong. You see, very strangely, it's not the things I know that are wrong, they don't challenge me too much because I know they're wrong.

I can find out what they are. What troubles me more than anything else is the things that I don't know that I don't know. You see, if you have known unknowns, you can find out about them. But if you have, according to Donald Rumsfeld, unknown unknowns, they must trouble us, surely. Because there are things I don't know that I don't know. Well, here in the book of Malachi, the last book of the Old Testament, people are back in the land, Jews are back in the land, they're trying to rebuild things, but they're deceiving God. And they don't know it. They don't know it. In fact, they think actually they're serving God. But actually they're short-changing God. See, one of our human traits is that we think we are right. We think we see the world as it really is. We think that we're neutral, we're unbiased. But that's not true, is it? We all have our prejudices, don't we? We all look at life through our own filters, don't we? There's only one observation on life that is true, accurate and unbiased. And that's a view from the one who made us, Yahweh, our creator and rescuing God. And all through Malachi, the people have been questioning God. The great word in Malachi is how, how, how. You'll see it a couple of times in our passage. They cannot see how they're acting wrongly. Now there are three observations which will frame our passage this morning. We could put them like this.

Number one, we are fickle, but God is solid. Look at those verses we started with, 6 and 7a.

6 and 7a means the first half of 7. 6 and 7a. God tells the people that he is solid. He keeps covenant, his promises with his people. He's faithful.

He's solid. And he's like this in order to protect his people. I, the Lord, do not change, so you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. See? Now all this is in contrast to the rebelliousness of the people. Look at 7a.

[4 : 00] In our fickleness, we too cannot keep our word. But God says, I am your God, you are my people, I am the Lord, I do not change.

We can't obey properly. We constantly fall into sin, but God is a solid one. He is faithful. God is solid and we are fickle.

Secondly, you'll think I'm getting through this rather quickly, won't you, in a moment? Oh, you just wait. We are, we are wondrous. We are wondrous, but God calls us back. We are wondrous, but God calls us back.

Look at the second half of 7, 7b. Return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.

That's what God says to his people. He calls his people to return, to return. Why? Why?

Because the people in Malachi's day have turned away from God and his commands, as 7a said. They've wandered off on their own. And the call of God is to come back, come back, come back. That's the call of God.

[5 : 19] Turn around from the ways you're going and come back, come back, come back. We call this repentance, is the technical word. It starts when we first become followers of Jesus and we turn around and it then becomes our daily practice.

It's seen in baptism, as AI will be demonstrating to others today. He dies to sin. It's all buried under the sea, under the water, and he rises to new life.

He's repented. He's turned around. He's come out with new life. And that repentance should be our daily practice, you know.

It was Luther who said in his 95 Theses that we should be repentant and repenting people every day. But it wasn't the practice in Malachi's day. It wasn't what they did.

They just didn't realise it. They'd wandered away. Hadn't realised it. Point number three. We are selfish, but God is generous.

[6 : 23] We are selfish, but God is generous. Let me just warn you now. We're going to stay quite a bit on this point, alright? We are selfish. Look at 7c. Return to me and I'll return to you, says the Lord.

But you ask, how? Here's the first how. How? How are we to return? You see, they didn't realise that they were acting wrongly. They didn't know how to correct it.

They didn't see that they were rebels. Indeed, the answer as to how they should return to God might surprise you. How should we return? How? How?

How? God says, you're robbing me. You're robbing me. How, they ask again at 8b. See? Will a mere mortal rob God?

You rob me. How? How are we robbing you? They ask at 8. See, they just don't get it. Don't get it at all. They're robbing God by not giving him the full share of their tithe.

[7 : 23] 9 and 10. How are we robbing you? In tithes and in offerings. You're under a curse. You're a whole nation. Because you're robbing me.

Bring the whole tithe into my storehouse. That there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty. And see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven.

And pour out so much blessing that there'll be not enough room to store it. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. And then God will bless them abundantly. And look at his fabulous generosity, by the way.

When he says he'll bless them abundantly. Just look at that. See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven. Pour out so much blessing that there'll not be room enough to store it.

He carries on, doesn't he? I'll prevent your pests from devouring your crops and the vines in your fields. And will not drop their fruit before it's ripe. All the nations will then call you blessed.

[8 : 24] For yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord. Because of his generosity. And that's the call of God on our lives today. Generosity.

Generosity. If God is generous like that. And we are his creatures. We should be generous too. So let's open that up and explore it.

You see the Old Testament tithe. The word means tenth. Wasn't just money. We often think of tithe. Tithing. As giving God 10% of our money.

But no, no. It included grain. It included animals for sacrifice. The temple needed its upkeep. And the Levites who worked there. The musicians.

Needed their income. But the Jewish people are holding back their giving. And they had no idea that they were doing so. So God calls them to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.

[9 : 23] They're robbing God of his due. They're cheating. That was the name of the game. And nobody likes to cheat, do they? And God certainly doesn't. Now tithing included giving to the worship of the temple.

It also included giving to the poor. There was no welfare state in those days. Jewish people wanted to look after one another.

And so they brought in all this food. The grain. And their money as well. And they brought it into the big storehouse in the temple. In fact, if you go to Israel today, you can sometimes see some of these storehouses.

They're quite deep in the ground. Some store water. And some store grain. And all the other things. In fact, some of the storehouses include the wealth when they have raided other nations.

And brought back all the gold and silver. The storehouse was huge. Now some argue today that bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse means that we should bring all our giving into the local church.

[10 : 31] They think the storehouse is the local church. But I want to challenge that. Is that the correct way to understand Malachi 3? Is the storehouse the church?

As I say, the storehouse was a reference to a place where all the treasures of the temple were. The temple were kept. Including the grain and the agricultural produce for the Levites and for the poor.

And withholding the full tithe was robbery.

This was an agrarian culture. So beware. Be very, very careful. Of saying that what is in the Old Testament as a storehouse is the church.

Or what is in the Old Testament as the temple is the New Testament church. In fact, the New Testament temple are the people of God.

Paul said, don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple? He told the Corinthians, you yourselves are God's temple. And that God's spirit dwells in your midst. More than that, the temple in the New Testament is Jesus specifically.

[11 : 39] Do you remember in John he said, destroy this temple and in three days I'll raise it again. And John adds, he was referring to his own body. His resurrection. In fact, on that resurrection day, all temples will be redundant.

Because all religions need their temples. It goes with priests and it goes with rituals. But Jesus reduces religion to rubble. How come?

Like this. All religions want to bridge the gap between deity and humanity. And they all start from the human side. Jesus is radically different.

He starts from God's side. And he does the repair work from there. He lives the life that we should have lived. He dies the death that we should have died. And in his body, he himself is the bridge of the infinite chasm.

He is the ultimate priest to replace the temple. Well, you say, John Ross, you're getting old and you're doddering. You've gone right off script. No, no, no. What has all this got to do with money?

[12 : 48] I'll tell you. I'll tell you. Think what Jesus said in Matthew 6. Where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

So where is your heart's treasure this morning? You see, we all set our hearts on something or other. It might be security. It might be significance. Some invest their lives in their children.

Others on progressing in a career. Or maybe like a man I know, you constantly check your pension and savings every night to see how your money is doing. Wherever your heart's treasure is, that's where you focus.

You live for it. You'll do anything to get it. Now, Jesus Christ died for someone like you. Why would he do that? Because you and I are his heart's treasure.

Every other treasure makes demands on you. Maybe even encouraging you to die for it. But Jesus is our treasure. He died to purchase you.

[13 : 56] And since Jesus said his heart on us, should we not return the compliment and make him our treasure? See, a danger for New Testament believers, us, is to make the tithe a law or a rule.

That's not what you find in the New Testament at all. What you find in the New Testament is that we should practice radical generosity. That's what we discover.

2 Corinthians 8, we should excel in the grace of giving. Indeed, in Malachi, it says, we are to test God with our giving. Did you see that in verse 10?

Test me now and see if I will not throw upon the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. What fabulous generosity from God.

And generosity is good for us too, you know. Think of it like this. Generosity reduces pressure on your will. See, when Paul talks about excel in the grace of giving, he's not laying down a new law, a new rule.

[15 : 06] So if he lays the rule down, you must give. No, no. You are free to be generous. Free to be generous. Generosity reduces pressure on your emotions.

The Bible doesn't say, look, you're well off, you've got lots of money. And look at these poor people over here or this man begging by the side of the road. Just look at that. Look at their undernourished bodies. As a rattle of tin.

It moves your emotions. You're drawn and you give. Why do you give? Because it pours on your heartstrings. No, no. The gospel says we've got freedom. We've got freedom to give generously. Freedom. I will publicly acknowledge that much of the rest of this talk is based on the brilliant Tim Keller exposition of Malachi 3.

You must read it. Listen to it. The gospel says we are free. We are free to give generously. If we give reluctantly, says Keller, then something else is functionally our Lord and Saviour.

[16 : 11] Let me say it again. If you give reluctantly, says Keller, then something else is functionally your Lord and Saviour. Think of Jesus on the cross.

Think of Jesus' radical generosity as he gives himself up to death. There he is dying for people like you and me. We are his heart's treasure. If that is true, then will he become the treasure of your heart?

Money won't be so significant for you. You'll find your significance in Jesus. Money won't be your security. You'll find that in Jesus. He's your security.

You are free. Keller puts it like this. I think he's absolutely brilliant. Don't sit down with a calculator and work out how much you should give.

Sit down with a cross and stare at it and ask God that you might love as he loves and give as he gives.

[17 : 21] Isn't that brilliant? Yes, we're to give according to our ability because through his poverty we can become rich. For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, said Paul, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that you through his poverty might become rich.

So remember, God does not change. He is the solid one. He's the reliable one. We are the weak ones. He always keeps his side of the covenant.

I will be your God but we cannot keep our side. I will be your God and you will be my people. We found ourselves in great difficulty in being God's people, true people.

Total obedience is not our thing. God constantly calls us back to himself. He wants a relationship with us. Not merely a robotic friendship based on law but one based on love and trust.

Isn't this the call of the gospel? Isn't this the relationship with God that he made us for? All religion, on the other hand, is a matter of keeping the rules. God calls us to be radically generous.

[18 : 29] After all, God has been incredibly generous towards us and he calls us to respond likewise. We are to excel in the grace of giving. You see, in the New Testament, amounts, percentages are never mentioned.

What it's called for is generosity. Radical, wild generosity. Generous with our time.

Generous with our love. Generous with our money. Generous with our homes. If Jesus Christ has gone to the cross and in outrageous love poured himself out for me in death and resurrection, how can I live in any way, stingily, or hold back my love, my time, or my money?

Let's pray together. Oh Lord God, our Heavenly Father, we thank you for pointing out where the people in Malachi's day have been robbing you and they didn't know it.

Maybe we do know where we're failing you. Thank you that you are our rock. But this morning, we're truly, truly grateful that you call us back to yourself. It's not that you want or need our money, you want our hearts, you want our love, you want our generosity.

[20 : 00] So we come to you this morning to tell you that we do love you and that we're massively grateful for Jesus taking our place on the cross, dying for undeserving rebels.

We marvel that he would go to such lengths, facing your wrath, so that we could be free. How can we, therefore, be anything but generous in return? Forgive us that we've withheld our love and our giving.

Please make us generous givers, we pray. In Jesus' name. Amen.