

A Heart that Returns to the Lord

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 06 May 2018

Preacher: Andrew Price

- [0 : 0 0] Gracious Father, we do thank you again for your word to us and we thank you that what you said to your people so many years ago is still very much relevant for us here today.
- And so we ask, Heavenly Father, that you would give us ears to hear, minds to understand, and as Harry said before, hearts that would live in light of it. For we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.
- Well, our actions and words towards people often reveal something of our heart towards them. So, for example, before my brother was married, he got to know this American exchange student and developed feelings for her.
- And we could tell this was the case because he started brushing his hair. He started dressing up and he even spent money on her, which for a poor university student who was very frugal with his money was a big thing.
- And then she went home back to America. They kept in contact for a couple of months and then my brother saved up and bought a plane ticket and went over to America to surprise her.
- [1 : 0 5] All these actions and especially spending all this money revealed something of his heart towards her, didn't it? And not long after he got there, she told him, I just want to be friends.
- So he stopped spending money on her. Young love. Oh. But the point of the story is that our actions towards someone often reveal our heart towards them, especially when it comes to money.
- And this is true of Israel's heart towards God, only in a negative way. You see, their actions reveal a heart that has wandered away from God, a heart that is no longer inclined towards God.
- Instead, they are simply just going through the motions with God. We saw this in chapter 1, verse 6, where they no longer honored God by giving their best sacrifices. Or chapter 2, verse 10, where they stopped trying to be faithful to each other and to God.
- Or last week in chapter 2, verse 17, where they gave up trusting in God and started accusing God of injustice. You see, over the last three weeks, their words and actions have revealed a heart that has wandered from God.
- [2 : 1 9] A heart that no longer loves God nor truly trusts in God. And so today, God begins by calling them back to return and recommit themselves to him.
- So point 1 in your outlines, chapter 3, verse 6 in your Bibles. He says, He says, Now, I think these verses here really summarize the big aim of the book.
- This is why God has sent Malachi the prophet. This is what God wants for Israel to return to him in right relationship. To recommit themselves to him, as the slide says there in the picture.
- But he begins by reminding them of who he is. He is a God who does not change. Which means, by the way, that there are not two gods of the Bible.

You know how sometimes people say there's the God of the Old Testament who is grumpy and angry all the time. And then there's the God of the New Testament who is kind and loving. As there are two different gods.

[3 : 34] In fact, I've heard Anglican preachers say that. But no, we have one God who does not change. He is rightly angered at sin back then as he is still today.

And he loves his people back then just as he still loves them today. And it's this love that I think lies behind God's comment in verse 6. Because you notice in verse 6 how God calls them the descendants of Jacob.

The last time God mentioned Jacob's name was back in chapter 1 verse 2. Where God declared his love to them by choosing Jacob over Esau.

If you remember back that far. God showed his heart towards them by choosing them and keeping them. And so by calling them the descendants of Jacob and then saying, I, the Lord, do not change.

He seems to be saying, I still love you. And that's why you have not been destroyed. Verse 6. Even though they actually deserve it.

[4 : 42] Why? Well, because they have not changed either. Do you see verse 7 again? Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them, he says.

They have not changed either. They continue to reject God. But God longs for them to return to him. Otherwise, one day he will have to destroy them.

As we heard last week in verse 5, God will put them on trial. Or literally it says he will draw near to them in judgment one day. And then it will be too late. But because he loves them, he is holding off, judging them.

And instead he is pleading with them to return to him in right relationship. Return to me and I return to you. Now it's hard to get a sense of the tone in which God says this.

But God, he's not half-hearted about this call to return. As if to say, look, Israel, if you grovel back to me, I suppose I'll get off my throne and come back to you.

[5 : 49] Rather, God's tone here is urgent and heartfelt, I think. How can we know? Well, because this is the sort of picture we're given in other places of the Bible.

So, for example, the story of the prodigal son. Do you remember that story? Here Jesus likens God to this father in the story. The son, like Israel, turns away from the father, goes off and spends all his money in wild living.

And then on the next slide, we read this. So the son got up and went to his father. And look at how Jesus describes the father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and was filled with compassion for him.

He ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. This is what God is like, says Jesus.

And since God does not change, Malachi 3 verse 6, then this is what he was like when he called Israel back to him.

[6 : 50] He's filled with compassion and he longs to metaphorically hug and kiss them. In other words, welcome them back. Indeed, he has even run out to meet them through his prophet, Malachi.

And we know he has run out to meet us in his son, Jesus. In fact, he did not even wait for us to come to him, actually. But he came out to us, not just in his son, but by his spirit.

Worked in our hearts, enabled us to believe and embraced us as his children. I find it so easy to take our God for granted.

I don't know about you, but our God is amazing. And his love for us is deep. And so he pleads with Israel, return to me and I will return to you.

Now, for Israel, returning to God meant no longer robbing God. So we're at point two in your outlines and verse seven in your Bibles. But you ask, Israel, how are we to return?

[7 : 52] Well, verse eight, will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. I don't know if you heard about this a couple of weeks ago, but on the next slide, I think it is.

The war memorial down at Box Hill, all the wreaths were stolen by some ewes that they videotaped themselves. I was going to show you the video, but there's too much swearing in it. They thought it was hilarious.

But there was outrage at how disrespectful and offensive it was to rob a memorial of those who fought for our freedom.

And that's a memorial of those who are no longer living. How much more offensive is it to rob the living God? And so he says, will a mere mortal rob God?

That is, is it right for a human to rob God? Everyone, including Israel, knew the answer was no way. That's offensive. That's disrespectful.

[8 : 52] And yet, says God, you rob me. But instead of realizing how offensive and disrespectful they've been, they then questioned God again and saying the rest of verse eight.

But you ask, how are we robbing you in tithes and offerings, says God? You are under a curse now, your whole nation, because you are robbing me, says the Lord.

Now, the tithe was part of Israel's sacrificial system. All of Israel were to give a tenth of their produce from the land to the Levites, the priests. Why?

Well, because the Levites had no land to work and provide for themselves with. Rather, their work was to look after the temple and minister to the people. And so these offerings and tithes would provide for three things.

They provide for the priests, the temple and the poor among the people. But it seems that people were not giving the whole tithe to God.

[9 : 53] Instead, they were keeping most of it for themselves and just going through the motions. Yeah, OK, it's time to give the offertree. Here you go. I'll just do it. Go through the motion.

Get out of there. In other words, they were robbing God of what was his. And that's the other thing we're to remember here. They're not only to remember who they are robbing, you know, God.

They also to remember that it all belongs to him anyway. I mean, that's what it means to rob someone, isn't it? To take what belongs to them. And everything belongs to God, especially his tithe.

And I think we forget this to ourselves sometimes when it comes to our possessions, our money, our things. And because Israel forgot who God was and because Israel forgot that it belongs to him and started robbing God, then they are under a curse.

Their land was not producing many crops. And the crops that did produce are often eaten by pests, it says. Now, again, it's easy to understand. You know, we don't want to be too harsh because it's easy to understand why they might have stopped giving to God.

[11 : 08] They've just returned from exile. Do you remember? Life is hard. They don't have much at all. And so it's much easier to say, look, it feels like, you know, remember, God has lost that loving feeling.

It feels like he's been stingy to us. So, you know, we're just going to look after ourselves and be stingy to him. But you see, the curse was meant to remind them that they were actually sinning against God by doing this.

It was meant to be a wake-up call to turn them back to God. It was meant to move them to give what they owed to God and trust that God would provide.

Because, boy, will he. Do you see verse 10? He says, Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house, the temple.

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 will be not room enough to store it.

[12 : 09] I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.

You see, although life is hard, and although they don't have much, and every bit counts, they are still to give a full tenth of what they receive.

And God says, if they do, then he will throw open the floodgates of heaven. The same expression is used in Genesis when he sends the flood. But it won't flood water, it will flood blessing.

Blessings like protection from pests and crops falling too early onto the ground and going rotten, such that they will not have room enough to store it all.

And while we are told elsewhere in the Bible not to put God to the test, God amazingly says here, test me in this. Why? Well, to encourage them to obey in giving their tithes.

[13 : 17] I remember when I was in high school, secondary college, back in the dark ages, as my kids would say, a student threw this scrunched up piece of paper at the teacher while they were writing on the chalkboard.

Yes, we still had chalkboards back then. And the teacher turned around, worked out who the kid, the student was, by the silly smile on his face and said, do that one more time and see what happens.

Go on, test me. You see, the teacher asked the kid to test him in order to encourage his obedience. So to hear, except the teacher's request to test him was a promise to punish.

God's request to test him is a promise to bless. Well, that's the passage. What about us? Point three in your outline.

Does this mean if we give to God, he will pour out his blessings on us? You know, make us rich too, so that there'll be no more room to put our cash under the mattress or wherever you put it.

[14 : 20] That's what some churches teach, isn't it? It's called the prosperity gospel. Well, before we get to that issue, we need to understand it's not actually the big point of the passage. Returning to God is actually the big point of the passage.

And our giving is simply an indicator that our hearts have done so. But why link returning to God in verse 6 with giving to God in verse 8?

Why? I mean, God could have said, return to me by loving me. Or he could have said, return to me by no longer accusing me of injustice like they did last week.

Or any of the other issues we've seen in Malachi. But he doesn't do that. Rather, he says, return to me by giving money, the tithe, to me.

Why? Why? Well, because more than most things, if they return to God with their wallets, it will truly show they've returned to God with their hearts.

[15 : 21] Now, Malachi doesn't make this clear. We don't get that from the text of Malachi, I need to say. But I think we get a hint of it from our second reading.

Remember what Jesus said in our second reading? He said, where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. And then he went on to say, you cannot serve two masters. You cannot serve both God and money. Jesus seems to single out money as something that we are especially tempted to pit side by side with God.

In fact, I don't have the slide, but in Colossians chapter 3, Paul lists all these things we are to flee from. And then he mentions only one thing is idolatry. He says greed is idolatry.

And so it seems like more than most things, money is something we especially are tempted to serve above God. And so our use of money is a litmus test for where our heart is with God.

If we are willing to give to God with our money, it shows we truly trust in him more than our money. It shows he is more important to us than our money.

[16 : 29] And if we don't, then perhaps he's not. We used to have Friday night family movie night at our house before the older kids started going to youth group. And now that they go to youth group, Michelle and I have an even quieter and relaxing night at home.

So thank you, youth leaders. That's terrific. Actually, sincerely, thank you for all the ministry you do with our youth. It is great. But back when we had our family movie nights on Friday night, a couple of the kids really wanted to rent this movie from iTunes.

Here it is on the next slide, I think. It was Alvin and the Chipmunks, the Squeakle. Such a terrible name. Anyway, they were begging me to rent this movie because in their words, they said, we really love this movie, please.

And so I said, sure, as long as you pay me with your pocket money for it. To which they said, we'll choose another movie. You see, if you really love something, then it'll be more important to you than your money.

And that's why I think God links returning to him with giving to him. Because more than most things, money really reveals a person's heart towards him.

[17 : 40] And so if Israel returns to God with their wallets, it will show they have truly returned to God with their hearts. And so the primary point of the passage is, I think, at not giving to God.

That's the secondary point. The primary point, I think, is returning to God. And if that's the primary point, then that's also the primary application for us. For God does not change.

He first loved us by creating us in his image. And then he continued to love us by giving his son Jesus to die for us. And despite us turning away from him time and time again, as Israel did, he is still the father who is filled with compassion, who has run out to meet us in his son, ready to welcome us home.

So the first question I need to ask you then is, have you returned to God? Have you put your trust in Christ and his death for you?

For if you do, then God will forgive you and lavish upon you every spiritual blessing in this creation with every physical blessing in the new creation.

[18 : 55] Have you returned to God by trusting in his son? And for us who have put our trust in Jesus, then that two points of application. At first, we need to keep returning to God.

Why? Well, because we keep sinning, don't we? We don't always love God with our whole heart. We're not always, as we sung before, undivided.

And so we need to keep returning to God, keep asking for his forgiveness. Some time ago, I baptized someone who is now in this congregation.

And he gave his testimony before he was baptized. And in it, he said, I realize how much my sin offended God and how Jesus actually gave up his life to save me.

So I asked God to forgive me like I have to do all the time. And he was saying that he has to keep asking God for forgiveness because he keeps sinning.

[19 : 57] We're no different. I don't know if you remember that, Alex. But we're no different, are we? We all need to ask for forgiveness each day.

It's why we have confession at church regularly. And perhaps for some here tonight, perhaps you've been a bit like Israel. Perhaps you've wanted from God in your life, particularly, you know, a lot this week or this month.

And if that's you, then return. Return to him in confession and repentance. And God will return to you with forgiveness and restoration.

He will metaphorically run to meet us and welcome us such that before we even say amen, he has forgiven us.

For our God longs for people to return to him in right relationship. And the second point of application for us who already trust in Christ is the secondary point of the passage.

[21 : 03] That is, we are to give to God. If we have returned to God with our hearts, it ought to show with our purses or wallets. Now, for us, this doesn't mean we have to tithe.

For we are no longer under the Old Testament law. And so nowhere in the New Testament are we told to give a tenth. It's not about the amount. Rather, it's about the attitude.

An attitude of generosity from the heart. That's what God wants. And so on the next slide, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians chapter 9. He says, You see, it's not about giving a tenth, is it?

It's about giving according to what you've decided in your heart. If you like, it's giving heartily. And that means not just deciding the amount we give, but also the manner in which we give.

So it says, not to give reluctantly or forcibly, but cheerfully. When the bags go around, we're not to begrudgingly put our hands in our pockets and go, Oh, or go, actually, I need to go to the toilet right now.

[22 : 19] Get out of there before the bag comes to your pew. No, we're not to do that. We're to be cheerful about it. In fact, the Greek word for cheerful is actually the word hilaros, from which we get the word hilarious.

Not that we have to break out in uncontrollable laughter when we're giving our money or think of our online giving. You know what I mean? But you see, it's about the attitude of our heart.

And the attitude is not only to be cheerful, but it's also to be generous, knowing that God is able to supply our needs. So Paul continues on the next slide, and he says, And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work.

Now, we'll just leave that slide up for a moment and look at the first paragraph I just read first. And notice that God is able to make his grace, that is, his generosity, abound to us.

Not so that we'll have a surplus to give, but so that we'll have a sufficiency, what we need to give. And here's the first place the prosperity gospel falls down.

[23 : 34] God does not promise in this life prosperity, but provision. Not surplus, but sufficiency. What's more, he promises us a sufficiency or what we need as he sees it.

Not as we see it. Because we all have different definitions of what our needs are, don't we? One of my kids say that they need a new mobile phone.

I'm not sure God would see it that way. But God's grace will give us what we need. In fact, the word sufficiency up there is actually the same word used for contentment.

And so God's grace could be seen not in giving sufficient money to be generous, but in giving us an attitude of contentment that is generous. Either way, we don't have to wait until we have a surplus before we give, do we?

You know how people say, I'll give when I earn this amount. When I get to this level, I'll start giving at this level. No, no, but we're able to give now.

[24 : 40] Because God's grace provides us with what we need to be generous now, not later. And we can be generous with little, can't we? I mean, a person who gives \$5 when they only earn \$15 is more generous than a person who gives \$1,000 when they earn \$50,000.

We don't have to wait until we have lots to be generous. After all, we've seen it's not about the amount, it's about the attitude. And when we do give, we will reap.

Not a harvest of food, as Malachi said in chapter 3, but a harvest of righteousness. So look at the second paragraph there. It says, See, by his grace, God will provide us with what we need to be generous.

Whether the right attitude of contentment in little, so that we can still be generous, or the right amount of money, we need to be generous. Either way, he supplies what we need to sow more seed for others.

And then we'll reap, not a harvest of physical blessings like Israel in Malachi, but a harvest of righteousness that lasts eternity. It's in this way we ought to store up treasure for ourselves in heaven, not on earth.

[26 : 02] And this is how we ought to give to God, not reluctantly or forcibly, but cheerfully and generously, knowing that God's grace will provide in one way or the other.

And if we need help to do this, then look back to the cross and see God's generosity to us in Christ. As Paul said to the Corinthians on the next slide, thanks Emma, he said, For you know the grace or generosity of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that through his poverty on the cross we might become spiritually rich.

See, we had to look at God's grace or generosity towards us in Christ, to help us be generous to God and others. And when we give to God in this way, it will reveal our hearts towards God, won't it?

For to give to God with our wallets or purses shows we have come to God with our hearts. Let me finish with this story. I remember not too long ago, one of the children from our 1030 congregation, she's about eight years old at the time, I think, came up to me at the start of the service and she handed me this envelope.

It was quite heavy and it was filled with all this loose change. She smiled and then walked away. And on the front of the envelope, this is what she wrote on the last slide. She says, Dear Andrew, I saved up this money for you to keep the church running so you can teach people about God and Jesse.

[27 : 33] I think he means Jesus, not Jesse. Now, spelling aside, she's got it, doesn't she? Here is someone who, by God's grace, knew contentment in little so she could still give generously.

And in doing so, she will not only reap a harvest of righteousness, but her actions also revealed her heart towards God, didn't they? May our actions do the same.

Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder tonight of who you are, first and foremost, that you are a God who longs for us to return to you.

And so, Father, we do pray that when we sin, and we all sin, that you would help us to return to you in repentance and confession, knowing that you long to forgive us and restore us.

And Father, we pray also that you might help us to give to you, not forcibly or under compulsion or reluctantly, but cheerfully and generously, remembering what you've given for us in your Son, our Lord Jesus.

[28 : 50] We pray these things in his name. Amen.