

Consider

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the morning service at Holy Trinity on the 14th of November 2004.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled Consider and is based on Malachi chapter 3 verse 8 through to chapter 4 verse 6.

Please be seated. And in the Bibles, if you would turn to page 778 to the first of our two Bible readings today, to the very end of the Old Testament, to Malachi chapter 3 and the beginning of chapter 4, page 778.

And let me pray. Heavenly Father, you cause all Holy Scripture to be written for our correction and rebuke, as well as for our training in righteousness.

So we pray that you will take these words, your words, and by your Spirit write them on our hearts, that we may believe them and do them for the glory of Jesus Christ. Amen.

[1 : 12] There was a man from a church in Florida, in America, who decided to sue his pastor. Don't get any ideas. Don't get any ideas.

Don't get any ideas. Don't get any ideas. Don't get any ideas. Well, the prosperity gospel, as it is sometimes called, is alive and well in Christian churches around the world. The prosperity gospel is that if you give generously, usually to your local church, then you will receive abundant blessing and wealth and prosperity here and now on earth in reward for your giving.

when I've been to Nigeria there are many Nigerian churches mainly Pentecostal churches that seem to espouse that sort of theology the church from where a lot of modern Australian Christian music comes the Hillsongs church in Sydney was reported I think last year in the good weekend in the Saturday age to be preaching that sort of ministry a prosperity doctrine and it's often modeled by the pastors who drive flash cars and wear expensive suits and all that sort of thing have expensive watches etc some of the not all but some of the preachers that you might hear in the early hours of the morning on TV when you're suffering from insomnia they're espousing the same sort of theology send us your checks and you will be abundantly rewarded and blessed by God with wealth and prosperity in return. Malachi chapter 3 is one passage that is sometimes used to support that view that theology or doctrine. So let's turn to it today and see as we're part of this series thinking about our giving and thinking about our commitment to God to see what this passage is teaching us and how it should shape and form us in our response to God and in our giving to God. The pattern in the book of Malachi is largely a question and answer, a disputation, a question is raised by way of accusation against the people of God, they might respond with an objection and then in response God will outline the substance behind the accusatory question. That's how the passage begins in verse 8 of chapter 3, will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me. There's clearly the accusation. The people's response is, how are we robbing you? And then the blunt answer to be unpacked in the verses that follow comes at the end of verse 8, in your tithes and offerings. The charge that God is making against

Israel is that his people are robbing him, not that they're sort of creeping into heaven to steal the riches of heaven but rather they're robbing him in not giving fully of the tithes and offerings that the law commands. The word tithe literally means tenth and in the Old Testament law in the first five books of the Old Testament in several places the command is that the people of God will give a tenth, a tithe of all their produce and largely the purpose of that tithe was to support the Levites who were the priestly tribe of Israel in their ministry as priests. And the word offerings at the end of verse 8 in this context probably means the part of some sacrifices that were there for the consumption by the Levites as well as the poor and landless people. Some sacrifices that you would make would be burnt up entirely on the altar, especially those to do with sin. But there were some sacrifices which were in a sense a bit like a barbecue. Some bits were burnt up as an offering to God and the rest were then consumed sometimes by the offerer or bits of it but much of it consumed by the Levites,

the priests of the day and it was partly a means of sustaining them for they had no land of their own, no crops, no animals of their own.

They lived dependent on the tithes and the offerings given by the other 11 tribes of Israel. Now even though the tithes and offerings were in a sense given to the priests, the Levites, God is the one who is ultimately being robbed. No doubt the Levites and priests were being robbed too but ultimately it is God who is being deprived. Now there are two things to note at this point about understanding this. The first is that behind this accusation comes a view of the world that is found all over the Bible that everything belongs to God. Psalm 24 tells us that the earth is the Lord's and the fullness thereof. Exodus 19 tells us all the earth is mine and we find similar understandings in other parts of the scriptures. Everything belongs to God. That's why God can say you're robbing me when you don't give your tithes and offerings to the priests, to the Levites as the law commanded. [6:47] What the Bible's view then about possessions and wealth is, is that we are but stewards of things that rightly belong to God. We're not the owners but stewards. God is the owner of everything.

And all we have in our riches and in our possessions is really what ultimately belongs to God but has been entrusted to us for really a short time that we are here on earth. Now how different that is from our worldview. Our worldview which says that we are to accumulate possessions, that we're to own possessions, that we fight for them, we might sue for our possessions. We're preoccupied with not only our possessions but the value of them. That's our worldview. The world seeks to seduce us with its consumerism and its materialism, feeding our greed. But everything is God's, the creator and sustainer of it all.

And so the challenge for us as Christians is to cultivate a biblical view that we are stewards and not owners. We're to have a stewardship mentality which recognises that if everything we have is God's, then our responsibility is to use everything that we have for God primarily and therefore not for ourselves, our own comfort or our own security. How can what's been entrusted to me be best used for the service of God? That's a Christian responsibility and obligation for each one of us. The second thing to note here is that the tithe literally was a tenth and the economics of the day required that. Let me explain. Twelve tribes, one of them had no land, crops, animals, they were the priestly tribe, the tribe of Levi, the Levites. If all the other eleven tribes were to give and sustain the priestly tribe so that every tribe was equal, then if you do your maths you'll work out that each tribe or person of each tribe would have to give eight and a third percent. That way all twelve tribes would have equal in effect. In addition, some of the tithes and offerings provided for the equipment and the supply and provisions of the running of the temple. So that would be in addition to just the upkeep of the people. And beyond that again, the tithes and offerings provided for the poor, for the landless, the orphans, the widows, the resident aliens who weren't allowed to own land, etc. So we can see that a tithe is literally required so that all have sufficient.

We must also bear in mind that in the Old Testament laws there were other laws that in a sense guarded against the accumulation of wealth and the sort of decline into poverty that some people might have.

[10:00] Every fifty years land would go back to its original owners or stewards. There were interest rate limits and forbidden in some places and so on and so forth. So the tithe was a necessary part of the economy of the people of God as much as the gift of eleven tribes for the sustenance of the priestly ministry provided by the tribe of Levi and the families of that tribe and so on. Ten percent then was in effect the minimum because in other parts of the Old Testament law the people of God are in addition to be generous and open-handed in their generosity to the poor, not just limited by the giving of tithes and offerings.

There are other offerings and first fruits that the people would also make in addition to the tithes that are required here. So ten percent we must regard as a sort of minimum figure in effect in the Old Testament for the giving of ministry and for the provision of the poor.

The accusation continues and is unpacked from verse 9 onwards. In verse 9 God says, you are cursed with a curse for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you, not just some individuals but in effect the nation as a whole. And the language of you are robbing me is literally you keep on robbing me.

It's an habitual sin that the people are practising in their withholding or restraining from paying the full tithe and offering. Verse 10 is the striking verse. Here is a verse that has in a sense a command with a promise, or two commands, the second of which is more like an invitation in effect.

The first command in verse 10 is bring the full tithe into the storehouse. The consequence of that would be so that there may be food in my house. The storehouse is probably the storehouse of the temple. If you remember a few weeks ago when we looked at Solomon building the temple, there were storehouses along the sides of the temple, so that's what's in mind here. And food in my house, God speaking, means food in my temple for the priests and their families and the poor and so on.

[12 : 11] Then comes the next command of verse 10, phrased here more like an urgent invitation. Thus put me to the test. Almost the language is come on, please put me to the test in this matter.

And the promise that follows from that at the end of verse 10, Now it's usually forbidden to test God in the scriptures.

But this sort of invitation to test God is rare. There are other occasions. But in a sense this is not a sinful test of God, such as Jesus was invited to do by the serpent or by the devil in his temptation wilderness experience.

Here the test is simply, obey me and trust my promise as a result. Now what is that promise? The opening of heaven and the pouring down of an overflowing blessing for the people of God. That means an agricultural prosperity.

It means rain, but not just rain for the sake of rain, rain for the sake of crops and for the sake of animals, for fertility and fecundity for the land and its agriculture. Verse 11 goes on to say that that would include a rebuke for the locust.

[13 : 36] That implies that the people are suffering a locust plague at the moment. And we know that periodically in Israel's history that was certainly the case. Moreover, it would also mean that the vines would be fruitful.

As the end of verse 11 implies, the vines are currently not bearing fruit as they should. Perhaps because of the lack of rain. Your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts.

And the end result of all of this overflowing blessing from heaven on the people of God will come in verse 12. All nations shall count you happy, that is, blessed, for you will be a land of delights as the Lord of hosts.

It's a far cry from where Israel is at this time. They're little more than a Persian provincial outpost. Under Persian rule, hardly a nation in its own right. And rather little, rather poor and rather lethargic spiritually at this time.

God is willing to be tested here. He's willing for the people of Israel to obey his commands and thus trust his promises in replying.

[14 : 44] Now in effect there's nothing new here in what Malachi or God in Malachi is saying. The commands to give of the tithes and offerings are there in the early books of the Old Testament in several places.

In Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. The promises of agricultural blessing are also there in the early books. Not least in Deuteronomy 28.

Where the end of a locust, the provision of rain, abundant fruit, the nation esteemed are all there. In that context it is if you, the people of God, will obey my law as a whole.

If you are evil, then blessing will come upon you as a result. If not, my curse will be on you. And there will be famine and drought and there will be mildew and locusts and plague.

All the things that are happening it seems in the time of Malachi. Now. So what Malachi is doing or what God is doing in Malachi is merely reinforcing the commands and the promises of the early covenant of Israel in the Old Testament.

[15 : 46] Now the question then from verse 10. Is this simply prosperity gospel? That is, is it simply a case? You people of God give generously your tithes and offerings and I'll make you rich.

I'll pour out from heaven an overflowing blessing on you. Or is it perhaps more subtle than that? At this time the people believed that it was in vain that they served God.

There wasn't any point. They got nothing out of it. They gained no benefit from serving God and obeying his commands. The righteous and the wicked, they seem to fare equally in life and in society.

So why bother serving God? And the people's view is not too dissimilar from many of our views and many people in our world. Why bother serving God?

There are richer people out there than in here. Why shouldn't we try and be rich like our world?

There are people out there who seem to have an easy life. Whereas many of us struggle in our life

in all sorts of ways as Christians.

[16:54] Does it really make any difference to serve God? Isn't it that in vain we serve God? Why not just get on and make the most out of our life? That's where the people of God had fallen into thinking in this book of Malachi.

We see that expressed in verse 13 and verse 14. You have spoken harsh words against me, says the Lord. Yet you say, well how have we spoken against you? And God's reply is that you've said it is vain to serve God.

What do we profit by keeping his command or by going about as mourners before the Lord of hosts? Now we count the arrogant happy. Evil doers not only prosper but when they put God to the test they escape.

Their view is that it's a waste of time to serve God. We get nothing out of it. We gain no benefit or profit from it. We might have given our offerings and our tithes in the past but we received no overflowing blessing.

And probably if we lived in litigious Florida we might have sued our pastor or Levitical priest for the lack of it. Faith is futile is what the people of God in Malachi's day were saying. Why bother?

[18:04] We see in our society the arrogant they prosper, the evil doer prosper, the evil doers commit sin and they still seem to escape the punishment of God. So why bother obeying God?

God's promised blessing, this overflowing blessing from heaven, where is it? Is it just a mirage? Nothing with substance. Well their view, like the view of so many in our day, is a view of spiritual short-sightedness or what we might call spiritual impatience as well.

It's prevalent in Malachi's day and ours. It's also a serious spiritual malaise. You see God's answer as the verses that follow is this.

A day is coming. Not an immediate overflow of prosperity and wealth but a day is coming.

A day when God's justice will both be evident and final. When those who revere him will be declared by God to belong to him and seem to belong to him forever.

[19:18] See what verses 16 and 17 say. Then those who revered the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord took note and listened. That is, it's not in vain to revere the Lord.

He listens and he takes note. And a book of remembrance was written before him of those who revered the Lord and thought on his name. Now that might mean that the people who revere God write their names down as a way of pledging their fidelity to God.

Or it might be that God caused somebody to write down the names of those people so that he would not forget. They shall be mine, says the Lord.

Verse 17. My special possession on the day when I act. Now it's not that they don't belong to God now here on earth.

But what God is making clear in this promise in Malachi is when this overflowing blessing can be expected. On the day when I act.

[20:18] And I will spare them as parents spare their children who serve them. And then once more you shall see the difference between the righteous and the wicked. Between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.

Here and now you don't always tell the difference. There are people who are pagans who seem to prosper and are rich and wealthy and have an easy life. And many who are Christians who struggle and suffer.

And are poor. It's hard to tell the difference. But God is saying here. On the day when I act. It will be clear.

There will be those who serve me. And there will be those who don't. Those who revere my name. And those who don't. Those who obey my law. And those who don't. Those who give generously of their tithes and offerings as commanded.

And those who don't. And it will be clear. And God is taking note and listening. He's observing those who revere him. Names are recorded.

[21:20] And on the day when he acts. They will not be forgotten. You see it is not in vain. That we serve God. For a day is coming.

When he will act. See how that day is described at the beginning of chapter 4. Firstly it's described for those who do not revere God.

Who do not serve him. The day is coming. The day is coming. Burning like an oven. When all the arrogant and all evil doers will be stubble. The day that comes shall burn them up.

Says the Lord of hosts. So that it will leave them neither root nor branch. A fearful end. For such people. But on the other hand.

For those who do revere God. For those who do serve him. The righteous. Then. That same day. For you who revere my name. The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

[22 : 19] You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall. What a glorious promise that is. The sun of righteousness rising with healing in its wings.

Charles Wesley used this verse and that picture in his hymn. Hark the Herald Angels Sing. To speak of the first coming of Jesus. But it just as much applies really to the second coming of Jesus. As to his first. For when Jesus returns. The sun of righteousness with healing in its wings. Not just physical and mental healing. But with healing in restoration of a relationship with God.

Healing of moral perfection. So that people are perfected with God in his blessed heaven forever. You see God is saying here.

That it does pay to serve God. We do benefit from serving God. Not necessarily an instant return.

[23 : 17] Indeed those Christians who give generously and sacrificial in a costly manner for the sake of gospel ministry. May well as a result and consequence directly be poor on this earth.

But it does pay. For on that final day. Great heavenly reward and overflowing blessing. Will certainly come from God.

For those who revere him. The final return. Is well worth it. Even if to some extent. There are few if any immediate dividends.

But note the severity. In the description. To those who do not revere God. Don't take lightly the warning here.

For this whole section. Is implying at least. That those who refrain. From obeying God's law. To give of their tithes and offerings.

[24 : 19] Are regarded as those who do not revere God. Who do not serve God. They're in the same camp as the evildoers and the wicked. So don't take lightly.

The issue of giving. Because Malachi and God here take it very seriously. That those who do not give generously. For the sake of ministry and the blessing of the poor.

Are in effect exposing their lack of fear or reverence of God. And they've allied themselves with those who are unbelievers. Not with those who believe.

They say that the last part of a person to be converted. Is their wallet or purse. But it must be converted. For if it's not.

The warning from this passage is severe. That on that final day. Such people will be burned up. With the evil and the wicked to us.

[25 : 23] And not spared. Along with the righteous. Who revere God. The proper response. And dealing with money. And possession. And wealth.

Is no light matter. For a Christian on earth. If you read the pages of the New Testament. Though tithes are occasionally mentioned.

In the ministry of Jesus. There is no clear explicit command. For Christians. To tithe. And many Christians. In some sense.

Have almost great joy. In discovering that. That there seems to be freedom. From that law of the Old Testament. Tithing is not obligatory. For Christians they would say.

But on the other hand. If you read through the pages of the New Testament. Never is there a hint. Let alone an explicit. Overthrow. Of the tithe command of the Old Testament. Either.

[26 : 18] It seems to me. That too often. Christians who. See that there is no tithe law. In the New Testament. Are merely trying to find an excuse. For stinginess.

And meanness. Rather than. Finding reason for generosity. It seems to me. That we should be asking. Not just on this question. But on similar laws.

That are not overthrown. Or explicitly reinforced. In the New Testament. Why shouldn't we keep this law. Why can't we keep this law. After all.

Ours is a much wealthier society. Than ancient Israel. Even in its glory days. And especially in the days of Malachi. For in the day of Malachi. Malachi. The context of the book.

Makes it clear. That the people are poor. That the land is struggling. That there is famine. And locust. But that's never an excuse. In the book of Malachi. To say. Okay. We accept you can't bring your tithes.

[27 : 13] And offerings this year. Because you haven't got much. By way of a crop. Your vine hasn't produced many grapes. And there's not been a lot of rain. No excuse. Bring your full tithes. And offerings.

Malachi says. To an impoverished. Drought written land. If they could bring their full tithes. And offerings. Why can't we?

Why shouldn't we? Why shouldn't we take the tithe. As a basis. For thinking about our giving. To the work of ministry. For the provision of ministry.

And for the benefit of the poor. And needy. As was its purpose. In the Old Testament. As well. And in addition. The blessings that you and I.

Have received from God. Far outweigh. Even the substantial ones. That ancient Israel. Had received from the hand of God. For though they'd receive. Redemption from slavery. In Egypt. And the gift of the promised land.

[28 : 10] And so on. The blessings that are ours. In Christ. Are the crown. Of the Old Testament blessings. More has been given to us. Than to the people of God.

In the Old Testament. We have then. Even more reason. To give back to God. In generosity. Than the people of God did. In the Old Testament. We ought to be actively.

Seeking out ways. To become more generous. Not less so. There are several motivations. In this passage alone. For generous giving.

There are more. Elsewhere in the New Testament. This is not a complete list. But here we find. That everything belongs. To God anyway. And that should liberate us. And free us. To be generous givers.

We find an element. Of thankfulness. To God's blessings. For God's blessings. In the past. But especially here. The expectation. Of future blessing. And without falling into.

[29 : 07] Unbiblical. Prosperity theology. That says. Give so that you'll receive. Blessing tomorrow. And be rich on this earth. Generous giving. For the sake of ministry.

That is in effect. That anticipating future blessing. Storing up treasure in heaven. Is Jesus expression. That's thoroughly. Biblical. And God promises.

Those who give generously. Such blessing on that final day. When he will act. Oh yes. Christian generosity. May in fact. Make us very poor. Here on earth now.

But the riches of heaven. Are worth the weight. We've called today. Consideration Sunday. We are urging each one of us. To consider.

Before committing. Our giving. And our time and gifts. Next week. We are urging each person. To consider. And spend time. Prayerfully. Considering these things.

[30 : 06] Consider that final day. Will you be accused. Of robbing God. On that day. Consider. Will you be able. To stand on that day.

Knowing that you've given. Generously. Of God's bounty. For gospel ministry. Consider what motivates. Your use of money.

Greed and selfishness. Or the love of God. And his gospel. We're urging you. To consider.

Your giving for gospel ministry. Here in this local church. The primary place. Of your Christian fellowship. And ministry. And in Inside Look. We wrote about it. And in the insert.

In today's notice sheet. There is some hints. Or guides. To think about. To consider. For your Christian giving. Consider again. God's command.

[31 : 03] And his promise. Put me to the test. Says the Lord of hosts. See if I will not open. The windows of heaven for you.

And pour down for you. An overflowing blessing. Consider the dangers. Of not heeding that word. The day is coming.

Burning like an oven. When all the arrogant. And all evil doers. Will be stubble. But consider the blessings. That are promised.

On that final day. For you who revere my name. The sun of righteousness. Shall rise with healing. In its wings. Consider these things.

Islands. Domino. And let's hear■■■. This is going to be ancestral.

[32 : 00] In the name we shall be found. The stress remains with■■■. In the name we shall slip through. The danger is being held. In it. Vida is always against the use. The path was being argued with the clay. Those things are the diving Group.

And likeitung relationship withthorns.