

A Heart that Returns to the Lord

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[0 : 0 0] Well, our actions and our words towards people often reveal something of our heart towards them, don't they?

So Christmas time is here and our girls are doing what they do every year and writing Christmas cards to children in their class. Some of your kids might be doing that or you might be doing it on behalf of your children at kinder and so on.

And our youngest, Megan, wanted to write a Christmas card for her teacher. But it wasn't even for her teacher that she had this year, it was for her teacher she had last year because she still loves this teacher.

So much so, in fact, that Megan chose the best Christmas card she could find and then she actually started practicing writing some different messages on a scrap piece of paper to see which one would be the best one or the most appropriate, got Michelle to check the spelling and so on.

You see, her actions towards her old teacher revealed something of her heart towards this teacher. And then Megan signed the card, love from Megan, your best student ever.

[1 : 1 0] And that revealed something about Megan's heart as well. I don't know. But the clincher was when she was even willing to buy a present for this teacher out of her own pocket money.

Then we really knew that she loved this teacher. You see, our actions and words towards someone, especially if we're willing to put money where our mouth is, reveals something of our heart towards them. And this is true of Israel's heart towards God.

But as we've seen, if you've been here over the last three weeks at least, that Israel's actions towards God actually reveal a heart that has, well, wandered away from God.

A heart that is no longer in the relationship with God. A heart that no longer really loves God. And so, for example, chapter 1, verse 6, where God says, if I'm a father, where's the honor due to me as a father?

They no longer honored God in their actions. For when it came to giving those animal sacrifices as part of the Old Testament, they didn't give their best or what was right.

[2 : 1 7] They gave what was left, what was left over. And then from chapter 2, verse 10, we saw that they were being unfaithful to each other in general, as well as being unfaithful in marriage.

In fact, they were being unfaithful to God as well. And then last week from chapter 2, verse 13, we saw that they accused God of showing injustice. They looked around at the world and said, well, look, the evil people are getting away with it.

Where are you, God? You don't care. You must have changed. You don't care about justice anymore. And we saw God's answer to that last week. You see, over the last three weeks, their words and actions have revealed a heart that has wandered away from God and no longer loves God.

And so today we come to what I think are the key verses for the letter, because here today, God calls them back to himself. He calls them to recommit themselves.

He reminds them that he still loves them and he calls them to return to him. So we're at point one in your outlines and verse six in your Bibles. He says, since I, the Lord, do not change, therefore you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

[3 : 3 1] Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. And so now return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.

And here God begins by reminding them of who he is. As we heard from the kids talk, he's a God who does not change. And so there is not one God of the Old Testament and a different God of the New Testament.

There is one God of the Bible. And God's character does not change from one Testament to the other. And so his character is consistent.

He continues to be faithful to his promises. He continues to love his people. In the words of so many Psalms, his steadfast love endures forever.

Yeah. Which is so different to many people, isn't it? I mean, people's love seems to change depending on how they feel that day, which side of the bed they got up, whether they're having a bad hair day or not.

[4 : 32] Someone told me this morning I need a haircut. So maybe it's, anyway, leave that at all. The only thing consistent about many people's characters is that they are consistently inconsistent.

They change, but God does not. And because of his unchanging character, he continues to love his people and so refuses to destroy them, even though their sins have given God every right to do so. And I think he, God deliberately addresses them as literally, he says, you sons of Jacob. And I think he uses that word Jacob and talks to them as sons of Jacob deliberately, because it's meant to remind them of what he said at the very start of Malachi.

So if you turn back to the very start of Malachi, chapter one, verse two. And remember Israel said, you don't love us anymore, God. And God's reply was, I do love you, says the Lord.

But you ask, how have you loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord? Yet I have loved Jacob, he said. What God is saying here is, remember, I have chosen to adopt you and your descendants to be my people, to be my sons, the ones who inherited the blessings in ancient times.

[5 : 53] And so by saying in chapter three, I, the Lord, do not change. And so you, O sons of Jacob, are not destroyed. He's reminding that he still loves them. He chose to adopt them as his sons and receive the blessings that Esau would have inherited.

That's what God is doing here. The irony, of course, is that they accuse God of changing. Just last week, they said, well, God, you change. You used to be a God of justice, but now it's evil people who seem to be prospering.

You've changed. But it's precisely because God has not changed that they continue to exist. If God changed all the time, then he would have wiped them out ages ago.

And so because God does not change, because he still loves them, he says in verse seven, return to me. Return to me. It's worth noticing here that the language of returning to me reminds us that it's not about rules and regulations.

It's about a relationship. God wants them to come back in relationship with him. And so sin is about breaking relationship with God. And forgiveness is about restoring relationship with God.

[7 : 01] You see, he wants our hearts to be in it. He wants that relationship restored. And the promise in verse seven, did you notice? If they return to him, God promises to return to them. That is, he promises to forgive them, to restore them to a right relationship with him.

And it's here I think we see the extraordinary love and grace of God that no matter how we have treated him, he still loves and longs for us to return to him.

And if we do, he'll always forgive, always return to us. I'm assuming you've heard of the story called the prodigal son.

Has anyone heard of the story? Just nod. So I've got one person nodding. Some people have, some people haven't. The son goes off and spends all his inheritance on extravagant living and wishes to return home, not knowing if his father will welcome him or not.

And as the story goes, while the son is still far off in the distance, the father sees him from back home and then runs towards him, throws his arms around him, kisses him, and then throws a party for him.

[8 : 12] And that's a massive welcome, isn't it? It's an extraordinary show of love and forgiveness and welcome home. And that's the picture we have of God here.

God who does not change but continues to love and will return with forgiveness if we ask for it. In fact, the word prodigal means extravagant.

And so the prodigal son should really be renamed the prodigal father because of God's extravagant love for when we return to him. Yet the people ask, how are we to return?

And God answers, well, by not robbing God. Point to verse 8. Just above verse 8. But you ask, how are we to return? Verse 8. Will a mere mortal rob God?

Yet you rob me, he says. Last September in Brazil, a man called Wesley tried to rob a woman called Monique.

[9 : 11] The problem was Monique is a martial arts champion. And so instead of robbing her, Wesley was taken down by her. Here she is, the next slide. And he was trapped in a headlock by her until the police came.

Now, robbery is not a good idea. And trying to rob people like Monique is really not a good idea. Because of who she is. And that's something of the sense of verse 8 here. When God says, will a person, a mortal, rob God?

He's saying, think about who I am. That's really not a good idea. In fact, it's more like, think about who you are compared to who I am.

And realize that what you're doing is actually not only foolish, but incredibly offensive. But instead of thinking about it, they simply question God again. And in the rest of verse 8, they say, but you ask, how are we robbing you, God?

So God answers, well, in tithes and offerings. You are under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me, he says. Now, the tithe was part of Israel's sacrificial system.

[10 : 19] All of Israel were to give a tenth of their produce from the land and money and so on. And the idea was, there was 12 tribes of Israel. I've only got 10 fingers. I don't have 12, sorry.

It's 12 tribes of Israel. And there was one tribe called the Levites who didn't have any land. So they couldn't farm it. They couldn't have their own living. But they were the tribe, the Levites, who looked after God's temple, God's work, taught the people and so on.

And so the idea was, the other 11 tribes would give a tenth of their produce and so on to the tribe of Levi, so that they could keep doing God's work and so on. But it seems the people were not giving tithes and offerings to God and his work.

Instead, they were keeping most or all of it for themselves and so robbing God of what was his. And that's the thing we need to remember. The word rob or robbing reminds us that this tithe was actually God's.

It belonged to him. I mean, that's what the word rob means, isn't it? To take what belongs to another person. And because they were robbing God, then they are under a curse.

[11 : 22] Their land was not producing many crops. And the crops that it did produce were often eaten by pests and so on. Now, again, it's easy to understand why they might have stopped giving to God.

Remember, they've returned from exile. Life is hard. They don't have much to start with. And so it's easy to say, well, if God's going to be stingy to me, because that's what it feels like, I'm going to be stingy back.

But the curse was meant to remind them that they were sinning against God. That's what God said back in Deuteronomy. 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 to trust that God would provide.

Because he promised to do that. Incredibly so. Look at verse 10. He says, You see, 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 get and trust that God will provide more for them.

[12 : 53] But here's the question I've got. Why does returning to God, because that's how the passage started in verse 6 and 7, why does returning to God involve giving money to God? Why is there that connection?

I mean, presumably God could have said, return to me by being faithful to me. That would work, wouldn't it? Or God could have said, return to me by no longer accusing me of injustice.

That would have worked, wouldn't it? I mean, surely returning to God involves those things. So why does God specifically link returning to him with giving money to him? And I take it, it's because money is the thing, the one thing we attempted to serve as a God more than anything else.

It's why greed is singled out in the New Testament and called idolatry, you know, the worship of another God. And so more than most things in life, what we do with our money reveals what's going on in our hearts.

I mean, it's why we have that phrase I mentioned at the start, you know, put your money where your mouth is. Because more than most things, money really reveals a person's mind and heart. It shows what they really think and feel.

[14 : 02] The other Friday night we had a family movie night, which is what we often do on Fridays. And the kids choose a DVD from the collection we have or one that we've borrowed from the library.

But this particular Friday they wanted to rent a movie off iTunes. It's this next movie, Alvin and the Chipmunks. You know, the squeakable. I didn't like the first one, so I wasn't going to like the second one.

But anyway, they really wanted to watch this one. And so they said, please, Dad, can we watch this one? Can we rent this one? We really want to watch it. And I said, sure.

As long as you pay for it with your own pocket money. To which they replied, we'll choose something else. You see, if you really do love something, then you'll put your money where your mouth is.

Or better, where your heart is. As I said at the start, actions often reveal a person's heart towards that person. And it's giving more than most actions that really reveals a person's heart towards God.

[15:06] That's why I think God links returning to him with giving what's his to him. For if they return with their wallets, it will show they have truly returned with their hearts. But we need to understand this connection so we don't actually miss the big point.

See, the big point of the passage is not about giving to God. That's the secondary point. Rather, the big point is returning to God with your heart. For God does not change.

And he will welcome us home. He will return to us and forgive us. In fact, God first loved us by creating us in his image. And he loved us again by giving his only son, Jesus, to die for us.

And so despite us turning away from him time and time again, as Israel did, he continues to call us to return home. John 3.16, you know, God so loved the world that he gave his only son so that whoever believes in him will not perish but have eternal life, have relationship restored.

So if we believe in Jesus, God will return to us, he will forgive us and give us life eternal. He will restore us to a right relationship with him.

[16:18] For he is the prodigal God who continues to show extravagant love. And so the first question I need to ask ourselves this morning is, have you returned to God with your whole heart?

That is, have you turned to Jesus in repentance and faith? Do you believe in Jesus? Do you trust in him and his death for you?

For if we do, God will forgive us, restore us and lavish upon us every spiritual blessing now in this world and every physical blessing later in the world to come.

There will be life eternal in all its fullness. Have you returned to God? That's the big question. For us who have, then there are two further points of application, I think.

The first is very similar to that other one. That is, are we continuing to return to God? Because if you're anything like me, we continue to sin, we continue to disobey, we continue not to love God with our whole heart.

[17:24] And so we need to keep returning to God. Keep asking for forgiveness. Last week, we heard another testimony. Do you remember? Alex, who was baptized.

He's not here at the moment, no. He's 11. Is that right? Yep. So 11-year-old Alex Loke, before he was baptized, he gave his testimony, if you remember. For those who weren't here, he said these lines.

He said, And the point is, he realizes he always has to ask for forgiveness.

Because he knows he keeps sinning. It's an 11-year-old who gets it. Well, so too must we get it. We must keep returning to God.

Because we keep sinning against him. But we're to do so with confidence. For God does not change. And so he always forgives. Always welcomes.

[18:27] Always returns to us and restores us. That's the first point. Keep returning to God. The second point of application then is, if we return to God with our hearts, then it ought to show in our lives, in our actions, in our words, and even in our wallets, purses, money.

For remember what Israel did? Their money was a reflection of what was going on in their hearts. Remember? Well, so too with us. It's like what Jesus said in our second reading.

He said, Where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. And so if we work to have treasure in this world, then our hearts will serve the things of this world, including money. And the problem with that is, it will let you down eventually.

I mean, how many people lost how many millions with the GFC? Money is fickle. It comes and goes, but it makes you its slave. It promises everything and delivers nothing.

But if we work to have treasure in heaven, then our hearts serve the things of heaven, including the God of heaven, who has delivered in the past, his son, in fact, and will deliver in the future life

eternal.

[19 : 41] But it's one or the other, Jesus said, we cannot serve both God and money, and which we serve will show whom we love. Now, this doesn't mean, of course, we need to suddenly tithe everything, you know, give a tenth of everything we have.

That was part of Israel's sacrificial system. Jesus has replaced that. And so nowhere in the New Testament are we told we must tithe or give a tenth. But we are told to be generous as God is generous.

We are told we have obligations to give to God's work, to care for God's people, to help those in need, and to provide for our families. And instead of the idea of tithing, the New Testament gives us principles of which we are to give by.

So on the next slide, Paul is talking about a group of people, the Macedonians, I think, from memory. And he says, Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up into rich generosity.

See, the principle of generosity. For I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability. Here we see the principle of generosity according to one's ability and sometimes even sacrificially, you know, beyond our ability.

[20 : 53] There's one principle. Another principle below there, it says, Each one should give what they've decided in their hearts to give. Notice, in their heart. Not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

Here we see the principle of the heart again. It doesn't, it's not about giving a tenth. It's about giving what you've decided in your heart to give, in generosity. For God loves a cheerful giver.

But if we truly love God with our whole heart, then we'll show it with our money. But this, remember, is the secondary issue. The money issue. The primary issue is a heart that returns and serves the Lord.

There was a guy at my old church called Phil. And he, we were running an event for church coming up. And we needed to raise some money for it. And it's just a small group. I think there was about four of us in the room.

And Phil said, Oh, look, I've got a thousand bucks burning a hole in my wallet. I thought, we can have that. I thought, I've never had a thousand bucks burning a hole in my wallet. I've always found something to do with it.

[22 : 00] And now he wasn't saying that to, you know, sound good or impressive. It was just a small group of us. But his action in giving reflect his heart to the Lord.

Didn't it? A few weeks ago, we had our Thanksgiving Sunday, which was the one day a year where we give over and above our regular giving in thanks to God. And the money raised at one level for me is not relevant.

What's relevant is the heart behind giving. That's what matters most. That's what I rejoice in and thank God for. That's what God longs to have.

And so may we be a people who serve and return to the Lord with our whole hearts and reflect it in our whole lives. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that you're a God who does not change.

And so as you loved people whom you created in the beginning, so you continue to love us now. Father, we thank you that when we return to you in repentance, turn to you in confession, that you always return to us in forgiveness.

[23 : 20] Father, we thank you, well, I thank you for the people here who are generous, who have given lots only because it reflects a heart that loves you lots. And we pray for others amongst us.

And we pray that you would change our hearts, that we would love you with our whole heart and reflect it in our whole lives, including the way we use our money.

Father, we ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.