

How have we robbed God?

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[0 : 00] Well, if you would turn back in your Bible to Malachi 3 on page 802, Malachi 3, 6-12.

One of the reasons that the book of Malachi is so helpful to us, I think, is because it speaks to the corporate culture of Israel. Every church has a corporate culture, doesn't matter how small or how large.

And our corporate culture develops a little like we develop our social institutions. We shape our corporate culture. And as it starts to operate, it becomes invisible.

And then it starts to shape us. And because it's invisible, it is more powerful in shaping us than we in shaping it. So you remember when Jesus speaks to the seven churches in the book of Revelation?

Every single one of those churches has a corporate culture different from the others. And the corporate culture is a combination of what's good and what's bad. So Ephesus, pure in doctrine, lost their first love.

[1 : 09] Thyatira, good works serving the poor, tolerated sexual immorality. You can have a church which loves God but not its neighbours. You can have a church that's orthodox in doctrine but legalistic in the way it applies it.

Committed to the Bible but more committed to its denominational distinctives. Correct in teaching but always has a manageable budget and manageable teaching.

I took a quick poll this week of a small group at St. John's. You want to hear what they say about our corporate culture? They said we have big heads and small arms. That we care about biblical orthodoxy but struggle to live it out boldly.

That we're faithful in teaching but overly comfortable. We're evangelical but not evangelistic. We avoid risks. And you can easily write those people off and say they're so judgmental and they're probably speaking about themselves.

The problem is we're proud of our corporate strengths but our corporate sins, we're blind to them. And the more blind we are to them, the more power they have to hinder the work of God among us.

[2 : 27] And sometimes it takes strong medicine to expose these things. I think that's why Malachi is such a help. It's not addressed to individuals. It's not addressed to one group in Israel.

It's addressed to Israel as a whole people. And you remember it starts in the very second verse with God saying, I have loved you. I loved you in the past. I'm going to love you in the future.

And I love you now. And they had completely lost touch with the love of God. So they were just going through the motions, the external motions. They hadn't left God for other idols.

They'd just lost touch with the love of God. Faith for them was a bit of a bore. And so the last book of the Old Testament comes as a bit of a shock.

As God drives at this spiritual sickness by exposing symptoms and bringing his word to bear of both judgment and of grace, of grace and judgment. But every time he exposes a symptom, Israel responds with a corporate question.

[3 : 32] Prove it. We don't believe you. Prove it, God. And I think it goes a long way to explaining why God speaks so strongly. Because when you lose touch with the love of God, everything becomes grey.

Everything becomes unclear spiritually. And the only way to break that is spiritual shock therapy. And what God does in this passage deals with the root cause of spiritual sickness.

I think this is the sin that lies underneath every other sin. It is, simply put, an astonishing crime we commit against God corporately and as individuals, which blinds our spiritual sight, which shrivels our hearts.

It is the most lethal symptom of spiritual sickness. And we're going to look at two points in this passage. One is about us and the other is about God. And do you remember last week at the start of chapter 3 in the first five verses, God said he was coming like fire.

A picture of the coming of Jesus and the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, burning and consuming everything that stands against God, but refining those who belong to him.

[4 : 48] And I think that's why our passage begins in verse 6 with a word of encouragement and warning. Let's have a look at verse 6. Verse 7, the sentence I read from verse 7 is only six words in Hebrew, and it's a brief history of the people of God.

And it goes like this. God turns to us with his blessing, with his goodness, with his love, and he blesses us, and we turn away, and we turn away, and we turn away.

That's it. And he turns back to us with his blessing again, and then we turn away, and turn away. And it would be easy and just and simple for God to consume Israel, just as it would be for him to consume us.

And the fact that Israel continues to exist, just as we continue to exist as a church, has nothing to do with our worthiness or goodness. It has to do with the grace of God.

And I know that completely runs against the grain of the way we think. We think it's so easy to put ourselves at the center of the universe. You know, things revolve around my rights and my future and my dreams.

[6 : 13] And, you know, the fact that you woke up this morning is just because of God's faithfulness to you, his steadfast love. And any variation in our circumstances, good or bad, does not change one fiber of God's love for us, which makes this sin all the more incredible.

So, two points. The first is the astonishing crime of robbing God. Have a look at verse 8, please. Will man rob God?

This is God speaking. Will man rob God, yet you are robbing me. But you say, how have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions.

You can hear something of the astonishment in the way God says it, can't you? This is absolutely incredible, outrageous, impossible. Can, will a human rob God?

Yet you are robbing me. I think we've probably all got friends or we ourselves have experienced the violation of being robbed. Here God is saying, you're doing it to me.

[7 : 27] Now, if you were planning to rob someone, you want to do it while they're not there, while they can't see. Robbing God is not just disrespectful, it's very dangerous.

He is the God of heaven and earth, and he sees, we steal from him in his presence. It's a lethal form of ingratitude. And they are completely blind to this in their corporate culture.

How have we robbed you? And so God gets very specific with them. He says, In your tithe and contributions, the whole nation of you. If you're new to the Christian faith, tithe just means 10%.

And in the Old Testament, God commanded his people to give three tithes. The first is 10% of everything that they gain in a year is to go to the Levites and the priests to support the work in the temple.

The second tithe is what this word is, contributions. It's to the temple upkeep, to sacrifices and those sorts of things. And that was to be done once a year.

[8 : 35] And thirdly, every three years, they were meant to tithe everything they had, every possession, for the poor in the land. So the idea that in the Old Testament it was 10% is a complete fiction.

The idea of the law was to create a culture of generosity. But the people in Malachi's day were holding out on God. They were holding back what God had commanded because they thought that God was withholding his love from them.

They thought it was right for them to hold their money back because what we do with our money is always a symptom of what we believe about the love of God. I had a great illustration of that this week.

Do you know during the Crusades, the Pope promised all the knights who went that if they die, they go straight to heaven. And so when they were baptized, many of them, as they went down into the water, they held up their sword so that their hand was above the water because they knew that this sword and its hand, and the hand with the sword, was going to cut and kill and maim people.

And they knew that had no place in the Christian faith. Well, that's what we do, isn't it? We do that with our money. We do that with our marriages or our schooling or our children or our ambitions.

[9 : 55] We hold it out of the water. And whenever we do that, we rob God. We rob God because it's all his in the first place. Every breath, every idea, every scent we have.

And we hold it back, imagining it belongs to us. And when we come into the New Testament, tithing or giving 10% is never, it's never commanded because there is a way, you know, you can give 10% and then think that the rest belongs to you.

But if you are a new Christian, Christians have found this is a good target to aim for. It takes some time to get there, but not too much time. Jim Packer says, it may be a good idea to practice tithing as a crutch until we get used to giving larger sums than we gave before.

But then we should look forward to leaving the crutch behind because now we will have formed the Christian habit of giving more than 10%. Now, I imagine some of you are thinking, that is all you Christians are interested in, money, money, money, money, and every now and again, sex.

You're obsessed. And my experience is that those who say those things most loudly have the most to hide.

[11 : 16] But robbing God is not restricted to money. How do we rob God? And I want to give you a warning. As I do this next little section in the sermon, I do not want it to be soul crushing.

Before the service, Dan took Jim Tucker over to a bush where a bee stung Jim. And Jim blames Dan for it. But then Dan took the sting, the bee sting out.

So I just want you to know about Dan's pastoral style. He wounds to heal. And sometimes the word of God does the same, except it's not unnecessary wounding.

So as we go through this, and I talk about what it is to rob God, I want us to lean on the Holy Spirit for his rebuke and confession. So how do we rob God?

Well, I rob God when I look for human praise. It's constant temptation for preachers. And we do it in very sneaky, underhanded ways.

[12 : 23] I rob God when I begin to think, well, if something's going well, it's because of my decision, or my ability, or my prayers. We rob God when we make a contract with him.

I will serve you, God, so long as you keep me in good physical health. We rob God when we think that our marriage is just about our needs and comfort and happiness, and the marriage is not for the glory of God.

We rob God when our ambitions for our children don't include God. Remember, two weeks ago, God desires godly offspring. Children are for the glory of God, as is marriage.

We rob God when we teach our children that everything is to serve them, their desires, and their dreams. We rob God with our singleness, by coveting.

When we start to believe that our identity comes from anything other than God, from my sexuality, or my success, or my attractiveness, anything other than the fact that God has saved me in Jesus Christ, and brought me to him as his most precious child.

[13 : 29] We rob God when we make the secondary things in life more important than the primary, and I spend so much time on the secondary things, I have no time or energy for God.

We rob God when we fail to pray for those people we've promised to pray for. We rob God with our suffering, when things get difficult. We immediately push the five alarm bell, and we try and work for the fix, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with doing that, and finding the fix, except that in your suffering, God may be disciplining you, and refining you for his glory, and you should at least ask.

If you don't ask what he's teaching you, you rob God. We rob God when we plan our retirement, thinking only of our comfort and pleasure. How many of us have been to funerals, where all the praise, and glory, and adoration go to the person who's died, and whenever that happens, we cheat God of his glory.

Every act of grumbling, every act of gossip, every act of self-justification, is robbing God. We rob God when we don't love others as ourselves, or we don't love God as we ought.

We rob God when we know we should do something, he's put it on our heart, and we hold back. We rob God when we hoard our wealth, and the cause of Jesus Christ struggles.

[14 : 50] We rob God when we give him the minimum of our time, and our talent, and our treasure, but spend lavishly and easily on ourselves. We rob God when we set our hearts on anything other than God, because I'm not just exchanging the glory of God for something else, I'm actually stealing God's glory.

One of the commentators says this, churches rob God. They rob God by loving God and not their neighbours, by being orthodox, but robbing people of gospel grace and power, by engaging in

mutual care, but freezing out newcomers, by obeying the gospel, but never being willing to suffer for it.

And when we continue to rob God without turning back to him, when we persist in that direction, we no longer, we remove ourselves from his blessing, and we live under his curse. And you can see what the curse is in verses 10 to 11, where God reverses the curse.

It's devouring pests, it's everything that withers who we are and what we have. And that doesn't mean if you're giving stingily to God's cause, your investments are going to die away and decrease. But there will be a withering and a narrowing in your heart, because underneath every act of robbing God is a narrow and withered heart, doubting the love of God. But I need to turn from that, from this astonishing crime, because it's all a bit depressing if we stop there.

[16:28] And how thankful to God we are for this passage, because it also teaches us, and it teaches us doubly, about the astonishing kindness of God. Just look at the shape of the passage.

The astonishing kindness of God comes before and after this little section on robbing God. On both sides, it's like a kindness sandwich, if you will. Look at the end of verse 7, the second half of verse 7.

The key call in this book, return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, how shall we return?

This is why God's speaking. And in the original, it's very personal. He says, you return to me, I return to you. It is the basic call from God to everyone who robs him.

Because whenever God calls on us to turn back to him, he always promises his kindness and salvation as the motivating fact.

[17:32] Even though, even though we don't deserve it, he continues to call, promising us, willing to demonstrate his grace and goodness.

You know, can he forgive my astonishingly thieving heart? Yes, he can. And yes, he will. He says it here. It's God who takes the initiative, the sovereign ruler of all things.

He pleads here for us to come back to him because he will turn to us. And despite the fact that Israel remains blind, they think they need nothing to do, God does even more.

And so you look at the other side of the sandwich in verse 10. Listen to these words. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house.

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. I thought the Bible told us not to test the Lord.

[18:40] Well, it does. We're not to test his patience, but we are to test his grace. We are to test his generosity. He says, bring in the full tithe.

I'll open heaven and give you more than you can possibly cope with in terms of blessing. Ah, but there are some of you who are thinking that sounds a little bit like the prosperity gospel. You know there's this gospel, there's this false gospel traveling around called the prosperity gospel.

And it treats God like an automatic teller machine. You know, ATM. Where you go along with a card and you put the card in and you type some numbers and out comes money. You go along with your card of faith to God and put it in and God wants you to be rich.

Makes you rich. No suffering. And Jesus' cross becomes a big embarrassment. What God is saying here is not because he needs the money, nor because he thinks it's good for us, but because he wants to give us himself.

Money, I know it's hard to believe this living in Vancouver, but money is not always a blessing. It can be a terrible, terrible curse. It usually is. And the desire for curse, the desire for money leads to all sorts of injuries and wounding and grief.

[20:02] What God wants is to bless us and he wants us to turn to him for us, for him to turn to us to live in face-to-face friendship. And while we're turned away from him, we can't receive his blessing.

That's why. He wants us to hold on to him, not the things he gives us. Blessing has to do with life. The potentiality for life and for love.

Running over. Please, says God, test my generosity. And the response, of course, to this is to make a practical, experiential test of his grace.

Try it out and you'll see that the Lord is good. God doesn't want Israel to come back to the temple next Sunday with a big fact tithe check and then go home with their hearts still far away from him.

He wants them to turn to him, to trust him, to supply their needs so that they will experience the overflowing kindness of God. Overflowing, overflowing, completely overflowing our tiny buckets. [21 : 09] And it's only those who have tested God's generosity by their own sacrificial giving who know the truth of this. You cannot experience what God is saying here until you actually take the step of trying it.

And when you do, the blessing may not be immediate and it may be indirect and it may not be what you expect but it will be better and it will never run out.

And when we do as individuals, it will change our corporate culture and that's the point of verse 12. All nations will call you blessed, God says, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. Isn't that a beautiful picture of a corporate culture built on the grace of God, living on the grace of God, attracting others, open hearts, open hands, so others are able to come and participate in the grace of God.

And don't you find it so very striking that this is the way God pictures or that the New Testament pictures the work of Jesus Christ. Jesus does the opposite of robbing God.

[22 : 17] Jesus is the giver. You know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor so that we through his poverty might become rich.

He died as a common thief between two robbers, paying God back for every robbery that we have committed, everything we've stolen, everything that we owe God, he has paid for.

And Jesus therefore becomes the source of life and blessing, the assurance of God's love. And he is the same yesterday, today, and forever, which means if we stick to Jesus and cling to him, you don't need, you really don't need to rob God.

And the Christian life is a constant turning to him and a constant testing his grace and a constant confession that we failed to do it. Forgive me, establish me, help me to, help me to, help me to test your grace again.

And if we as a church have a corporate culture that displeases God, whether by smugness or arrogance or lack of compassion, we need to repent and turn back to him.

[23 : 29] We need to ask him to give us the mind of Christ as a community so that we as a community might test his grace. And if you are robbing God and the Holy Spirit has applied this to you, I just say, as God says, bring the full tithe into God's house, put him to the test and you will be blessed.

This is Malachi 3. Will a human rob God? Return to me and I will return to you and I will open the windows of heaven.

Amen.