

Come back and test my generosity

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: 17 November 2012

Preacher: Steve Jeffrey

[0 : 00] Let's pray. Gracious Father, we thank you again for your word. And we know that this passage, the implications of this passage, strike fear into the hearts of your people.

And so we ask that by your spirit, we might see the glory of this passage and the glory of what you have called us to, the glory of what the Lord Jesus called his disciples to.

And I pray, Father, that we would make sure that we would labour, in fact, to have the covenant order in the right way and that we would obey and then you would bless.

So help us now, we pray, as we look at your word and I pray that it would result in action from your people. Amen. Keep your Bibles open in Malachi 3 and also, if you've got a chance, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 and Luke 12.

I'm going to go three fingers in there somewhere. It should work well. What has become clear as we've gone through Malachi over the past three weeks is that unless you have a clear grasp of who God is and what he's like, you won't relate to him correctly.

[1 : 28] Or to put it another way, to have a true relation with God requires a vivid understanding of the character of God. And we saw that in the very first chapter. God reveals himself in chapter 1, verse 2 with, I have loved you and Esau I have hated.

We saw a vivid picture of the love of God there, that God's love is sovereign, elective, unconditional, free love. Unfortunately, the people of God in Malachi's time didn't see or feel the greatness of God's love so clearly.

We also saw in chapter 1, verse 6, that God is a father and a master. He is worthy to be honoured and revered. Malachi gives us a vivid picture of the greatness of God by consistently calling God Lord Almighty or Lord of hosts.

He is the master, the king, over all the starry hosts and the hosts of angels and everything. That is, Malachi wants us to get the sheer majesty of God and God's people didn't see or feel that so clearly either.

They didn't see or feel the sheer greatness of God's love and they didn't see or feel the sheer greatness of God's majesty. And when you've got a small view of God's love and his majesty, what you do is you give him the leftover of your life.

[2 : 52] He fits in around your life, around other things in your life. Why would you give your all or your best to something or someone who you don't value?

And the evidence of how little they valued their relationship with God was their carelessness in their worship by bringing the dodgy sheep and unfaithfulness in their relationships and the way they treated each other and particularly the husband and wife relationship.

The faithfulness of God to his covenant and the faithlessness of his people to that covenant. That is the picture so far. And yet, what chapter 3 verse 6 says is that that's the consistent picture of all ways of this relationship.

I, the Lord, do not change so you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them.

Now, the title, Lord, at the beginning of verse 6 is very significant. It is quite literally God's special covenant name, Yahweh.

[4 : 07] I, Yahweh, the covenant God, do not change. I have not failed to keep my promises. I am consistent.

And it is because of God's consistency to love his people that they have not been destroyed.

Interesting, his people have been consistent too.

Ever since the time of your forefathers, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. And so, if consistency was a virtue, they'd be on top. But, unfortunately, it's not in this case.

It's quite striking that God uses his covenant name, Yahweh, but he refers to his people as the descendants of Jacob rather than using their covenant name, Israel.

What God is doing here is he's pointing out what is the nature of the consistency of his people and that is not as a covenant people. Their consistency in their behaviour is that of the scoundrel Jacob who often swindled and stole and robbed.

[5 : 22] That's not what you'd expect from the people of God. They have consistently breached the covenant relationship. And so, as many times in the past, Yahweh again calls his people to come back to him in the second part of verse 7.

He's calling them to repent. But at the end of verse 7 reveals just how seared their consciences were. But you ask, how are we to repent?

In other words, what they're saying is, us? Who, us? What do we need to repent of? What have we done wrong?

You see, in their estimation, there was nothing wrong with their conduct. Repentance wasn't needed. They weren't aware of any guilt on their part whatsoever. And so, as the case when someone is, their perception of reality is so wrong, God kind of grabs his people by the scruff of their collar and goes, slap, slap, to try and, you know, smack them out of it, if you like, to help them to wake up to reality.

And their sin is spelled out to them in very practical and personal terms by God. Verse 8, will a man rob God? In other words, how is that possible?

[6 : 48] And yet, you rob me. But you ask, how do we rob you? In tithes and offerings, you are under a curse, the whole nation of you, because you are robbing me.

You see, what that's meant to do there is it's meant to quicken a dull conscience. That's what God's doing here. It's like, poke in the eye.

Wake up. It's meant to knock them out of their apathy. It's meant to help them to see the dire danger that they are in.

It is unthinkable that any person would rob God. And he says, but you rob me. You see, this is personal. The total gravity of the offense is clear.

Rob God. How is that even possible? How is it even possible that a mere mortal would somehow storm into the throne room of God and put a gun to God and snatch his purse?

[7 : 47] So to speak. How is that possible? This is personal because this is not a sin primarily against the priests and the Levites and the temple ministry as bad as that would be.

This is a crime against God. They were robbing God. How were they robbing God? And notice this bit because this is very crucial.

Verse 10. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. They weren't robbing God by not tithing.

They were robbing God by not tithing enough. Withholding the full tithe was tantamount to armed robbery against God.

And it's quite possible that they were giving two, six, seven, eight, nine percent and yet God says, you're robbing me by withholding some of the tithe.

[9 : 07] And they were oblivious to any wrongdoing. What do we need to repent of? I mean, we're giving something to God. That should be okay. He should be happy. It is careless.

It is apathetic. In the same way they thought it was okay to bring, oh, that sheep's nearly dead.

Quick, get down on the sacrifice. The same as they thought it was okay to bring God the worst.

That somehow it would be okay that they would just give God a bit of the tithe. He'll be okay with that. Something's better than nothing.

Beggars can't be choosers. What apathy. What carelessness. What faithlessness. It is casual. It's flippant. It's presumptuous.

It is arrogant and it is not obedient. Not only were they not giving God their best but they weren't giving God their all. And the consequence of withholding the tithe is the terrible statement in verse 9.

[10 : 11] You are under a curse. The whole nation of you because you are robbing me. Let me tell you why that's so terrible that statement. Back in Deuteronomy 28 God having told the people about the covenant then says he talks about covenant blessings and covenant cursings.

At the beginning of Deuteronomy 28 he says to them covenant blessing is this you obey me and life will be so good that it will be even better than you could possibly imagine.

If however you do not obey me you will wish your mother never met your father it will be that bad for you. You just wish you were never born. And the term he uses is curse and it's the term he uses here.

You are under a curse. And the second really bad thing about this statement this verse is the term nation.

The covenant God Yahweh uses the same name that is nation the same title nation that he does with everyone else out there.

[11 : 30] It's the same title he gives to the people who are not his people. He doesn't use the name Jacob he uses the same names he gives to the nations who are not in a covenant relationship with him.

That is the people of God in withholding the full tithe are acting like the pagan nations and not giving God his due. And in not giving him the full tithe they are no different than the nations.

You cannot tell them apart from the nations. So I think it's really unhelpful when some Christians set aside the teaching of this text.

What they do is they say things like true statements. Galatians doesn't tell us we're no longer under the law and that Jesus has abolished the tithe.

The first thing I want to say in response to that is that the tithe wasn't introduced under the law. That is it's not the first time you see it.

[12 : 40] God didn't just sort of out of the blue say to his people at Mount Sinai here's a bunch of good stuff and by the way give a tenth of all you got slipping in there before they realise what's going on. It's like we didn't expect to sign up for that one.

Before the law in Genesis 14 Abraham gave a tenth of everything to Melchizedek he was prompted by God.

tithe that wasn't law. Jacob did the same in Genesis 28 and so the idea of giving a tenth which is what the word tithe means is not restricted to the law.

It came before the law and it was just prompted by generosity. Now it's true the New Testament doesn't command Christians to tithe and I think that too many therefore go wow that's fantastic so all of a sudden generosity is up to what I decided to be.

I don't think God operates like that in the same way he tells us what love looks like he doesn't let us make up our own mind what we think love looks like you've never read anywhere in the New Testament truly truly I say to you you've heard you 5% or even 2 will do you've never read that on the contrary Jesus says in Luke 11 verse 42 woe to you Pharisees because you give God a tenth of your mint your rue and all other kinds of garden herbs but you neglect justice and the love of God you should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone he says be careful that your giving is not some sort of cover up from sin but he doesn't throw it out it's also noteworthy in 1 corinthian 16 Paul makes proportionate giving the norm of the christian life just like the tithe if you prosper you give more if you prosper less you give less giving is in proportion of income and so

[14 : 50] I think that we are on dangerous ground if we think that Jesus has given us an exit strategy to give less and that somehow it doesn't apply and that God is going to be happy with less from us than he was with his people in the Old Testament and I think this Malachi 3 passage is a timely reminder for the people of God at St.

Paul's because by our own admission in the last National Church Life Survey only 32% of us give 10% or more out of our net income that's about a third so why is the tithe not commanded in the New Testament I can only speculate but I'm going to speculate with scripture 2 Corinthians 8 and 9 flick over to there and I want to particularly focus on the Apostle Paul firstly I want to say that I think one reason the Apostle Paul didn't command a tithe is probably because he wanted to emphasize willingness rather than compulsion so it's not commanded 2 Corinthians 9 7 says each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give not reluctantly or under compulsion for God loves a cheerful giver the

Apostle Paul says in another passage that he's talking about the need to love and he says I could command you to do it but I rather you did it willingly so have a crack at willingness first and in 2 Corinthians he says I am not commanding you but I want to test the sincerity of your love by comparing it with the earnestness of others and so Paul downplays the possibility of commanding a certain level of giving because he wants to emphasize loving willingness rather than constraint I also think he didn't use the command to tithe because he wanted to emphasize generosity rather than limitation I don't think he wanted the Christian church to go well I've given 10% so that's it so

any new need comes up sorry done my bit while he affirms giving in proportion to one's income he also wants to urge people to go beyond the old constraints of simple proportion of giving for example in 2

Corinthians 8:3 he commends the poverty stricken Macedonians like this for I testify sorry he commends the poverty stricken Macedonians like this for I testify that they gave as much as they were able and even beyond their ability entirely on their own they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints in other words he commends the Macedonians for going way beyond and in 2 Corinthians 9:6 he says remember this whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly and whoever sows generously will also reap generously in other words the issue isn't meeting a minimum amount a minimum limit the issue for Paul is how to unleash maximum generosity and so the command to tithe just doesn't suit that approach but

I also think that Paul didn't use the command to tithe because he wanted to emphasize that all getting should be designed for giving here is both practical and it is costly and it requires trusting God. One of the problems is that they, and I think us, we kind of want God to go first. That is, what we do is we

[22:47] invert the covenantal order. The order of the covenant is, in Deuteronomy 28, you obey, I will bless. What we want to do is you bless us and then I'll obey it. Give me the money then I'll give it away. And that's an inversion of the covenant. And my friends, it's actually idolatry. It's actually idolatry. They want fruitfulness before they will obey the law of tithing. And so what happens here in Malachi in calling the people of God to obey and to trust is simply the same as what Jesus calls his disciples to do in Luke chapter 12. It's very, very simple words. Seek first the kingdom of God and I'll take care of the details. I'll take care of the material details. Pursue the kingdom and you'll have everything that you need in order to pursue the kingdom. And that is a scary thought. I'll tell you a reason why

I think it's a scary thought for Jesus' disciples. It's because the major thrust of Luke chapter 12, where those words are in the middle, is do not be afraid. So Jesus must have realized it was a scary thought for his disciples. I don't think it's a mistake that Jesus refers to God in verse 30 and verse 32 of Luke 12 as their father. And in verse 32, he refers to the disciples as the little flock. That is their father, their heavenly father is the infinite God of the universe. That's him. And down here is us. And we are little lambies in a paddock, all scared of foxes and wolves.

There's a big difference between us and God. And so Jesus says, do not be afraid, little sheep. But did you notice specifically what the threat is that makes Jesus says, do not be afraid? In verse 32, you need to have your Bibles. If you're not at Luke 12, you've got to get there.

[25:17] I want you to see that this is God's word. It's not my word. What are they being tempted to fear in this context? You can find the answer by going back a couple of verses and by going forward a couple of verses. If you go back into verse 30, the thing that they were in danger of fearing is the call to no longer be like the nations who seek the accumulation of stuff. Jesus says, don't be like them. And his disciples go, oh my goodness, that's scary. I mean, all of a sudden the heart starts to pump and the adrenaline starts to rush. Will I be happy? Will I survive? Will I have enough? And Jesus says, do not be afraid, little flock. Do not be afraid to stop seeking things. Or if you go forward to verse 33, the things that they're in danger of fearing is giving things away.

Oh my goodness. Generosity. Getting rid of my possessions. The heart starts to thump. Adrenaline. That's scary. Will I have enough? Will I be happy? How could I possibly enjoy life? And in verse 33, do not be afraid, little flock. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. You see, seeking the kingdom includes both of those things. We stop focusing on our quest on things and we start selling what we don't need and turning our stockpile of resources into ministries of kingdom bringing love. And Jesus knows that that message right there goes boom, straight in the hearts of his disciple and fear is what they feel. And there is fear in many of us when this word is brought to us because there's a possibility that we have consciously or subconsciously inverted the covenant order. And when we convert the covenant order, it is idolatry. I cannot be radically generous because God hasn't given me enough.

And when he does, I will. That's an inversion of the covenant order and it's idolatry. It's a lack of trust.

And these words are scary because it's possible that God's will for us is that we might live a lifestyle very different than the one that we are striving for and living right now. And Jesus knows that it's a fearful message and he says, do not be afraid, little flock, for your father has been pleased to give

you the kingdom. You've got it already in Christ.

[28 : 20] You've got the kingdom. You know the outcome. He promises all the blessing of the kingdom and the pathway to the kingdom is the path of falling in love with King Jesus, treasuring Jesus and trusting Jesus.

It means falling out of love with things and taking on a wartime lifestyle that maximizes all resources for the cause of the kingdom that we are seeking.

And the promise here is that the majestic God who we have looked at in Malachi is good for it. He never turns his back on any of his promises.

We will be provided for. He is the covenant God who has never turned his back on his promise. He will graciously, mercifully, lovingly give us everything that you need to fulfill his purposes.

We will never lack a single thing we need in order to seek the kingdom. And so, that's the word of God.

[29 : 28] That's his word. And does it settle it for you? That's the issue here for the people of Malachi. And it's the same issue for us. Will you trust his word?

I think there are two things from Luke 12 that would tell us where we are in trusting him. And the first is our heart and the second is our wallet.

Verse 34, for where your treasure is, there your heart will be also. Our heart tells us if we are anxious and our wallet tells us if we are generous. And both of us will tell us if we're trusting Jesus and treasuring Jesus.

So, let's hear the warning of Malachi. Let's not cast this text aside. Malachi is written to people who claim to be the faithful people of God.

And they faithfully, if you like, or consistently turn up to the temple for worship. And God says, I just wish someone would close the door. So that you would not again and again bring such an offense before me.

[30 : 37] Because their hearts were not right. They failed to see and to feel the greatness of God's love. And the greatness of his majesty. And so, they threw half dead sheep on the altar for sacrifice.

And thought, that would be good enough. They gave God, opened their wallets and went, five and a ten. I'll give God the five, because the ten. I've got to go out down to Jerusalem just after this.

Oh, he'll be happy with that. And he says, you've robbed me. You've robbed me. It's tantrum out of the people of God sticking a gun in the face of the eternal, infinite God and saying, give it to me.

Let's not cast this text aside. We do not want to be a people of whom God says, St. Paul's, you are just like the rest of Chats would.

You have the same priorities they have and I cannot tell you apart. The practice of our core value of radical generosity, I believe, radically sets us apart in a materialistic culture.

[32 : 01] It reads, our gifts, possessions, finances of time belong to God. We will therefore use them for his glory and not our comfort. We desire to be like the Macedonians whose joy in Christ through extremely difficult circumstances resulted in rich generosity towards others.

We believe, and here's, I think, a crucial statement. We believe that in a world that loves money, a lifestyle of radical generosity proclaims that Jesus is our greatest treasure.

That bit's essential because I think it lines up with the goal of God blessing his people in Malachi 3.12. You see, God will bless his people when they give the full tithe and here's the result.

Then all the nations will call you blessed. When God blesses his people because of their obedience, the nations see it and they don't marvel at the people.

They marvel at the God who has blessed his people. The bottom line here is the reason God wants to bless his people is for the nations.

[33 : 11] And that is the goal of radical generosity. We want our neighbours, the nations at our doorstep to see that Jesus is our greatest treasure and that he is more valuable than their bank accounts and their superannuation and their houses.

Brothers and sisters, it is clear from Malachi that our worship of God not only requires us to give our best, it requires us to give our all.

And worship is far more than singing some songs and memorising some verses. Worship requires everything. Commitment Sunday is next Sunday.

And you've got pledge packs. I want you to go away from tonight and in the course of this week, just commit to this.

To earnestly, consistently and honestly bring this whole matter before God. Asking him specifically, God, am I robbing you?

[34 : 32] Because I don't want to be like those people who had no clue whatsoever. Am I robbing you? Make it clear for me. Because I do not want it be said of me.

You're robbing me. Just like the nations. Amen.