

How Shall We Return? Malachi 3:6-12

I. INTRODUCTION

A. *Stranded*

1. There was a shipwreck and two men landed on a deserted island.
2. The minute they got there, one of them started screaming, “We're going to die! We're going to die! There's no food! No water! We are going to die!”
3. The second man calmly sat down and leaned against a palm tree with a grin on his face. His peace drove the first man crazy.
4. “Don't you understand,” he said, “We're going to die?!”
5. The other serenely replied, “No – it's you who doesn't understand. I make \$100,000 a week.”
6. The first man looked at him dumbfounded and asked, “What difference does that make? We're on an island with no food and no water!”
7. The second man answered, “I said, I make \$100,000 a week AND I tithe. Make no mistake - My pastor will find me!”

B. *Today*

1. As we continue our study *through* the Bible, we come to Malachi 3 and that well-known passage where God asks the people of that day, “Will you rob Me?”
2. These verses have been used thousands of times throughout church history as the main text of a sermon on *tithing*.
3. It just so happens that as we pursue our *regular course* of study here at CC of simply teaching *through* the Bible, it's the passage we've arrived at.
4. So – if you're visiting with us this morning and maybe it's been years since you've gone to church – and it's been your impression that all they talk about in church is giving – please understand that the message this morning is simply a part of our plan of working our way through the Bible from beginning to end.
5. Having said that, as always, I'm excited to see what God has for us today in His Word.

II. TEXT

A. Vs. 6-7

6 “For I *am* the LORD, I do not change; Therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.

1. In the verses just prior to this, Malachi foretells the coming of the Messiah who will purify and refine the people.
2. He will remove anything and anyone who works evil and brings corruption.
3. They will once again be His people and offer to Him a holy sacrifice.
4. Here in v. 6, the Lord reminds them that the *reason* they haven't been destroyed is because of His *covenant love*.
 - a. many generations before, God had promised Jacob that his descendants would be His special people.
 - b. the people this was addressed to *were* those descendants
 - c. and Malachi reminds them that God's patience and long-suffering with them is not because God is *reluctant* to judge sin, but because He doesn't change!
 - d. He had promised to bless Jacob's descendants – and God always keeps His promises.
 - e. though they were certainly *deserving* of judgment – God mercifully gave them time to repent and fulfill their part of the covenant, which was to *obey* Him.
2. He issues an urgent appeal to them in v. 7 to take advantage of this delay of judgment by repenting . . .

7 Yet from the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept *them*.

Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts.

“But you said, ‘In what way shall we return?’

3. In the covenant that God made with the nation of Israel, He promised to bless them if they would obey Him.
 - a. God had *more than* kept His side of the bargain,
 - b. but, except for a short period of time here and there throughout their history, the Jews proved themselves to be a rebellious and stiff-necked lot.

- c. still – it’s not too late and God once more, as He had so many times before spoken through the prophets, called them to return to Him!
- 4. He says, “Return to Me, and I will return to you”
 - a. how He longed to bless them!
 - b. how tender His heart was toward them and yearned for their good!
- 5. But their response keeps in character with their attitude from the beginning of the book of Malachi – they’re *sarcastic* in their reply to the invitation of God.
- 6. God says, “Return to Me,” and they reply “How? What do You want us to do?”
- 7. They’ve *asked*, so God gets *real specific* in *how* they can demonstrate their return to the Lord . . .

B. V. 8

8 “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings.

- 1. Once more we need to get the historical perspective to understand what God is saying here.
- 2. This all takes place after the Jews had returned from exile in Babylon.
- 3. A good hundred years have passed and they’ve rebuilt their capital city of Jerusalem and the temple of God.
- 4. People are once more bringing their sacrifices to be burnt and they’re making a good show of religion; but it’s just that - a show!
- 5. Over and over Malachi has revealed the immorality of the people.
 - a. though they were observing the *forms* of religion
 - b. the *spirit* of it was totally absent!
 - c. the animals they were bringing to sacrifice were blemished and lame
 - d. the men of Israel were divorcing their Jewish wives so they could marry younger pagan women.
 - e. sorcery, adultery, perjury and extortion were all growing more rampant –
 - f. and yet the very people who practiced these things still went to

- the temple with their sacrifices.
6. They had adopted an attitude that many people have today – that as long as they observe the *forms of religion*, as long as they go to church occasionally and drop a dollar in the offering plate – God lets them off to live whatever way they want the rest of the time.
 7. In v. 8, God confronts this kind of thinking!
 - a. by bringing a sacrifice, they thought they'd *paid God off*.
 - b. but He tells them by failing to bring what was *required*, they were *ripping Him off*!
 8. What God required wasn't just an animal once a year – the Law required them to bring a *tithe*.
 9. The word *tithe* means *tenth*.
 - a. the Law God delivered to the people by the hand of Moses dictated that the *first tenth* of *all* their increase belonged to the Lord.

(Lev. 27:30-33 Num.18:20-28 Deut. 12:6-7, 17-19 14:28-29)

 - 1) this applied to their flocks and herds,
 - 2) to the harvest of their crops, vines, and fields
 - 3) and even their investments
 - 4) whatever their *increase*, they were to set aside the first 10% and give it to the Lord by bringing it to the priests.
 - b. God, speaking through Malachi, tells the people they are *robbing* Him by not bringing the tithes and the offerings He had spelled out in the Law.
 - c. the tithe *belonged* to God; He claimed it as His own.
 - d. their refusal to yield it was equivalent to *theft*!
 10. God intended the tithe to be a demonstration for the people that *everything* they had, including their very *persons*, belonged to Him.
 - a. the reason they were to give the *very first 10%* of their increase was so that they might live in constant *dependence* on God.
 - b. they were to see themselves, not as *owners*, but as *stewards*.
 - c. they were to hold everything they had as belonging to God and entrusted to them to see how they would use it for His glory.
 - d. by giving the *first 10%*, it would move them to hold the remaining 90% with careful hands.
 11. Those who tithe know precisely what I'm talking about.
 - a. when you sit down and look at your income compared to your

- expenses – you realize that your lifestyle usually rises to the *same level* as your income.
- b. it presents a huge challenge when a person decides to start tithing because now they have to take 10% of their gross income and give it to God.
 - c. it's no longer available for paying bills or funding one's lifestyle.
 - d. but a funny thing happens – those who make the commitment to tithe realize some of the things they thought they had to have aren't really necessary.
 - e. tithing has the effect of *simplifying* our lifestyle and bringing a measure of peace we didn't have before.
 - f. that peace is the result of giving God what He asks for and then trusting Him to give us what we need.
 - g. tithing reminds me I'm a *steward* – not an owner;
 - h. and as a steward, I can have complete confidence that my Master will always provide for me what I need to do His work and live as He directs.
12. Here in v. 8, God tells the people they were *robbing* Him by not bringing their tithes.
- a. He was not fooled by the weak and imperfect sacrifices they were bringing.
 - b. God is not some beggar who will take whatever we will give.
 - c. He is the Sovereign Lord of Glory and is not appeased by just any bone we throw Him.
 - d. He wants it all – all we are, and all we have.
 - e. the tithe was the way He gave them to demonstrate this gift of everything.

C. Vs. 9-12

9 You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation.

1. Their failure to bring their tithes had resulted in a *curse*; what that curse was we see below . . .

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and try Me now in this," says the LORD of hosts, "If I will not open for you the windows of

heaven and pour out for you *such* blessing that *there will not be room enough to receive it.*

11 “And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, so that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field,” says the LORD of hosts;

12 And all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a delightful land,” says the LORD of hosts.

2. Because the people had neglected to obey the Lord and pay their tithes – their harvests had been meager, and bothersome set-backs constantly harassed them.
 - a. they would plant their fields but a mold would blight the crop.
 - b. in the middle of the growing season, a new pest would invade the fields
 - c. the rains failed to come when needed.
 - d. and their plans for a big harvest were always thwarted
3. The prophet Haggai, who’d lived a short time before, put it this way

(Haggai 1:6)

**You have sown much, and bring in little;
You eat, but do not have enough;
You drink, but you are not filled with drink;
You clothe yourselves, but no one is warm;
And he who earns wages, Earns wages *to put* into a bag
with holes.**

4. The remedy, the way that God tells them to *return to Him* is to obey His command and once more bring Him what is His due.
5. They are to bring the first 10% of their increase to the storerooms set up around the temple grounds
6. God then says something that would have *shocked* the people – He challenges them to put Him *to the test*.
 - a. this is remarkable because earlier He told them *not* to test Him with frivolous requests.
 - b. *but regarding tithing*, He stakes His reputation and calls them to see if He won’t take care of them if they will only do their part and render their tithes!

7. Remember how all this began – God said, “Return to me and I will return to you.”
 - a. they asked – “How shall we return – what do You want us to do?”
 - b. “Where have we NOT done what You want?”
 - c. God’s reply was “You’re ripping Me off by withholding the tithe.”
 - d. “You can *return* to Me by restoring it, and when you do, I will return to you with a blessing so great you won’t have room to hold it.”
8. The point God was trying to get across to them is that giving to Him is part and parcel of the life of genuine faith.

D. Giving

1. Friends – The Command to Give is not so much God’s way of raising *money* as Giving is the Father’s way of raising *children*!
2. God knows that left to ourselves we are sinful and our natural tendency is to be selfish, small, and Scrooge-like.
3. God designs and desires that His people be like Him; that they take on His likeness – and He is a Giver!
4. God so loved the world that He – What? He Gave!
5. Being conformed to His image means becoming a giver.
6. Now, the people of Malachi’s day might have replied, “But I do give! Once a year I bring an animal to the temple as an act of worship to God!”
7. True! But one animal once a year was far short of a tithe!
 - a. that offering was not obedience to God,
 - b. it was only an attempt to *mask* disobedience and a greedy, selfish heart.
8. God wanted them to tithe because it would deliver them from anxious *self-reliance* and give them the freedom of *relying on God* for His provision.
 - a. the more I walk with the lord and grow in my understanding of His ways, the more I have come to realize that the essence of faith is *complete dependence on God*.
 - b. as I raise *my* children, what I want to see in them is increasing *independence* from my wife & I – I take that as a sign of maturity.

- c. but *spiritual maturity* moves in precisely the *opposite* direction.
 - d. as sinners – we pursue independence from God
 - 1) we see this in the Fall in Genesis 3
 - 2) the appeal to Eve was to turn her back on God and go her own way
 - e. redemption means returning to the Lord, laying down our independence from God and learning to trust Him completely and without reservation!
 - f. tithing is therefore a critical element of spiritual maturity
 - g. by setting aside the first 10% of my increase, it puts me in the place of having to rely on God to take care of my needs – all of them.
9. There are many people today who are repeating the same error as the people we are reading about here.
- a. they go to church, maybe even regularly
 - b. but collection is a church function in which they only take a *passing* interest.
 - c. if they do give, it's a dollar or two.
 - d. they are those who think it's the *little things* that count.
 - e. the way some people give, you would think the church is *coin-operated*.
 - f. still - it makes them feel good to think of themselves as having *given* –
 - g. but really, they've not given what the Lord *wants* them to.
 - h. their gift is given so *they* can leave church feeling they've performed some kind of religious duty; that they've paid their spiritual dues -
 - i. and having done so, they're now free to live the *rest of their lives* whatever way they want to.
 - j. they've tried to buy God off!
 - k. but really, they're *ripping* Him off!
 - l. and not only Him, but themselves because a failure to give to God as He directs results in a curse – a curse of selfishness and smallness that will shrink a person's soul.

E. Tithing

1. What was true for the people of God under the *Old Covenant* is just as true for the people of God under the *New!*

2. While it's true that tithing is nowhere *commanded* in the NT, it's also true that tithing isn't merely a principle of giving found in the Law of Moses.
3. The tithe, as a measure of giving to God, *predates* the law by hundreds of years.
 - a. Abraham tithed to God
 - b. Jacob tithed
 - c. when Moses gave the command to the people proscribing the tithe, he was merely codifying a *principle of giving* that was already well-known
 - d. well-known, but rarely practiced!
4. Tithing is the *basic measure* of what the people of God are to render to Him.
5. God is quite clear here in Malachi – the first 10% belongs to Him!
6. To withhold it is theft!
7. But to give it faithfully as the Apostle Paul says in 1 Cor. 16, is to enter into a place where you can confidently trust that God will take care of your every need.

III. CONCLUSION

A. Attitude

1. An enthusiastic minister was exhorting his congregation to become more active in church affairs and to get the church on its feet.
2. “Brother and sisters, “ he proclaimed, “What this church needs is the energy to get up and walk.”
3. One of the deacons gave a warm, “Let her walk, brother. Let her walk.”
4. The preacher raised his voice a little in the way they do in some churches and added, “But we cannot be satisfied with walking; we've got to pick up speed and run.”
5. The deacon chimed in with added intensity, “Let her run, brother; let her run!”
6. The preacher took this word of affirmation as a good sign and really warmed to his message. “But running is not enough either. One of these days this church has got to fly!”
7. That same deacon echoed loudly, “Let he fly, preacher, let her fly!”

8. The pastor then set the hook. “But if the church is gonna’ fly, we are all going to have to give!”
9. To which the deacon was heard to mumble, “Then let her walk brother. Let her walk!”
10. How perfectly this story illustrates the attitude of some religious folk.
 - a. their religion only goes as far as talk
 - b. it has little impact on what their wallet
11. The world’s most important theological document is that Bible on your lap.
12. But the world’s *second* most important theological document is in your hip pocket or purse – it’s your checkbook.
13. Jesus said that where our treasure is, there will our heart be also.
14. You can tell a person’s whole value system by reading their checkbook.

B. Survey

1. In a recent survey of charitable giving, it was discovered that while church attendance is actually on the rise – giving is declining.
2. The average church-goer gives less than 2% of his or her income.
3. Numerous studies have been done on what it would mean if people actually tithed.
4. In one church in the mid-west some 20 years ago, the day the treasurer resigned the church asked the local grain elevator manager to take the position.
 - a. he agreed under two conditions:
 - 1) that no treasurer's report would be given for the first year.
 - 2) that no questions be asked about finances during that year.
 - b. the people were surprised but finally agreed since most of them did business with him and knew him to be a man of integrity.
 - c. at the end of the year he gave his report:
 - 1) the church indebtedness of \$228,000 had been paid!
 - 2) the minister's salary had been increased by 8%.
 - 3) the Benevolence Fund had increased 200%.
 - 4) there were no outstanding bills.
 - 5) and there was a cash balance of over \$11,000!
 - d. the shocked congregation asked, "How did you do it? Where

- did the money come from?"
- e. the treasurer answered: "Most of you bring your grain to my elevator. Throughout the year I simply withheld 10% on your behalf and gave it to the church in your name. You didn't even miss it!"
5. I realize when the subject of tithing comes up, that many people feel defeated because things are so tight as it is – the thought of giving 10% to God seems impossible.
 - a. I remember the first time I was challenged to tithe.
 - b. I said, "There's no way!"
 - c. but the Spirit kept working on me and I realized that tithing, like everything else in the Christian life is a step of faith!
 - d. yes, tithing meant there were some goodies I had to delay.
 - e. making the commitment to give God 10% of my gross income meant that I had to alter my lifestyle a bit
 - f. but I noticed an amazing thing happened – God started blessing my finances!
 - g. and the constant little bothersome sources of waste that had eaten at my finances before, largely evaporated.
 6. I realized that it wasn't a case of being able to afford tithing – I couldn't afford NOT to!
 7. Tithing is an investment of faith in the goodness and grace of God that takes us out of being self-reliant and makes us depend on God!
 8. Trust me – He is far more trustworthy than we are clever and resourceful!