

# The Question of Giving

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[ 0 : 0 0 ] Well, I've got a friend who used to work in wealth management.! In fact, he comes to this church. You probably know who I'm talking about. And his clients were some of the richest people in Scotland.

And I would always ask him who his clients were, but he would never tell me because he's a man of integrity. But he would always say, you'll know them. They're in public life. You'll know exactly who these people are, but I'm not telling you any specifics.

And what he would do in his job would be advise and manage their wealth for them. Obviously, his relationship to their money was as a steward or as a manager, but never as the owner because the client was the owner of their own money.

And so what he did on a day-to-day basis was he invested their money in line with their values and in line with their desires and basically made their money grow.

But what if he decided to act as the owner of their money instead of acting as the manager or as the steward? Well, he'd be guilty of fraud. The financial services authority would be onto him like a ton of bricks and come on him because you can't really rob your clients of their money.

[ 1 : 1 5 ] But as we turn to our Bible reading this afternoon in Malachi chapter 3, verse 6 to 12, this is what we see happening where God is the owner of everything, but he accuses his people of robbing him.

Remember, Malachi takes the form of a court case. If you're just joining us, it's like one big long court case. And in it, there are six disputes where the people of Israel question God and basically challenge everything that God says to them.

And so these people have strayed from their covenant relationship with God. God entered into relationship with them, but they're not happy and God is not happy with them because of their behavior.

And so because they've strayed, God still loves his people. He's entered into a relationship with them and God wants his people to return to him. And so God is confronting them with their bad behavior.

And so in this fifth dispute in the book of Malachi, God is challenging them on their approach to money, to wealth, because they're robbing him. They're not giving to God what he is due.

[ 2 : 2 6 ] And so that's really the heart of the message today. It's all about what we as people give to God because how we use our wealth, whether we realize it or not, actually impacts our relationship with God.

It's not two different compartments of life, your money, your wealth, and God. But they're interconnected. And we'll see that today. And that's why Malachi's message applies directly to all of us.

And so the challenging question for each of us is, do I rob God? Am I guilty of robbing him in the sense that the people in Malachi's day were guilty of robbing God?

So let's look at this passage under three headings this afternoon. Firstly, how we rob God, verse 6 to 9. Secondly, what we should give God, verse 10 to 12. And then thirdly, why we can give.

So how we rob God, what we should give to God, and then how and why we can give. So first, how we rob God, verse 6 to 9. Now the context of this whole dispute is basically the character and nature of God himself.

[ 3 : 3 5 ] So let's read again verse 6 and 7. I, the Lord, do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them.

Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, how are we to return? So the first thing is that the Lord does not change.

Now the fact that God does not change is called immutability. So God is unchanging in his being. He's unchanging in his will.

He is unchanging in his purposes. God cannot be changed for the better because he is perfect. And he cannot be changed for the worse because he can't cease being perfect.

So God is incapable of change. He is constant in every single way, which means it's only because of God's unchanging commitment to his people that his people are not destroyed.

[ 4 : 42 ] And so his people deserve rejection. They deserve to be left for their unfaithfulness to God, but they can count on God's mercy.

Why? Because he's unchanging. There's no possibility that God will change and won't welcome them back. And so God had entered into this covenant relationship with his people, and so he would be faithful.

He can't change. He would be faithful. And so while God doesn't change, the message here from God to the people is that they must change. They're the ones who've got to change.

Just notice that God calls them the descendants of Jacob there in verse 6. Why does he call them that? Well, if you know anything about Jacob in the Bible, Jacob was a cheat and a swindler.

And so just like their descendant Jacob was a cheat and swindler, so now Israel are robbing God, cheating God out of what he is due.

[ 5 : 48 ] And so what God does is he reminds them that from the days of their ancestors, they have turned away from God's decrees, and they have failed to keep them. And so God is calling his people back.

He's calling his people to repentance. He says, Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. So this is a call to reorientate their lives back to God.

That's essentially what repentance means. And because God does not change, the unchanging God, in his love and in his mercy, has left this door open for the people to return back to him.

That's how good and loving and kind and gracious and merciful God is, which is hope for us all, isn't it? No matter what we've done or who we are, God will take us back.

He'll welcome us back. He's unchanging. He's promised to forgive and to show mercy, and he will.

And so the people ask, How are we to return?

[ 6 : 52 ] So the people don't even realize that there is an issue here. And so God responds to them in no uncertain terms. See verse 8. Will a mere mortal rob God, yet you rob me?

God couldn't be more direct with his people. And yet they still question God. But you ask, How are we robbing you? They're not even aware of just how disgraceful their behavior is towards God.

Because this word for rob in the original here is a rare word in the Old Testament. You don't find it often. And it's because it's a violent word with a sense of taking forcefully or of seizing or plundering, even of raping.

And so this is a serious accusation from God. They're robbing him because they don't give God their tithes and offerings. Tithing basically means one-tenth.

And so that's how much of their wealth they had to give to God's temple in Jerusalem. And their wealth didn't just mean money. Their wealth meant their produce.

[ 8 : 05 ] But their stinginess was an indication of how little they loved God and how little they cared for people. Because cheating God out of what they ought to give to God meant cheating people too.

And so God's not simply calling them out here because they just weren't generous enough. God is accusing them of stealing from him. So this is criminal activity.

And that's why God says that they're under his curse. Verse 9. You're under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me.

So that's the whole nation is cursed. Why? Well, they weren't keeping their covenant obligations. They weren't fulfilling their side of this relationship that God had entered into with them.

And so if you go back to the beginning of the Old Testament, God had rescued his people Israel from their slavery in Egypt. And he'd entered into this covenant with them. He had given them laws to govern their life.

[ 9 : 11 ] And he was leading them into the promised land, a great land for them to live in, away from their slavery. And part of the laws to govern their community life together as a people included tithing, what God had blessed them with.

So the tithe was a tenth of what the person had. And it was to be given as a reminder that God had given them this beautiful land.

And so they were to give back to God a tenth of everything he'd blessed them with. But because they were withholding the tithe from God, God is withholding his covenant blessings from them. And they were receiving the covenant curses instead. Instead. And so they weren't living with an awareness that God is the owner and they are tenants of everything God has given to them. And I suspect that we easily forget this too. We forget that God is the owner of everything and that we should give back to him.

[10:16] And if we don't give back to him, what we're reading here is that we are robbing him. Which means everything. So you, me, all of our wealth, all of our possessions, everything is God's.

Just listen to these words from one of David's prayers in 1 Chronicles 29. These were the words that we started the service with. David says, everything in heaven and earth is yours.

Wealth and honor come from you. Everything comes from you. And we have given you only what comes from your hand. So what is David doing? He's acknowledging God is the owner of everything.

And so we are merely stewards. We are managers of the wealth that God has given to us. And so we're basically like my wealth management friend who doesn't own the money of his client, but he is entrusted with this money to steward it and use it well.

And so we rob God when we see ourselves as the owner of all we have instead of as the manager or the steward. But wait, some might just push back and say, Jonathan, come on, you just don't understand my life, my circumstances, my situation.

[11:39] Jonathan, I have worked hard to get my wealth. So I do actually own it. I think you'll find. I did well at school, worked hard, did well at university, also developed all the skills needed to do this job, which I'm well paid for, which is really down to me and my ability.

And so you see, I've managed to achieve all of this through my hard work and effort. And now, of course, well, yeah, there is some truth in that.

But it misses the point that everything is God's. So everything you have and everything I have comes from God. So God gave us the brains.

God gave us the abilities. God gave us the opportunities. God gave us the circumstances in which we live. And so it's all down to God when you push it back.

Let me just press this home a bit further. Just say that you were born in Edinburgh. Not that lesser place through in the east, but a different Edinburgh.

[12:43] A settlement called Edinburgh in one of the world's most remote islands called Tristan da Cunha. And it's an overseas British territory.

And it's located in the South Atlantic Ocean. And it's a volcanic island. And it's got about 250 people who live there. So just say you were born in that Edinburgh instead of this Edinburgh.

It's called Edinburgh, apparently, because the Duke of Edinburgh, a long, long time ago, went over to this small island. If you lived there, imagine just how different your life would be. Your life would be different. Your opportunities would be different.

Your income would be different. Your prospects would be different. Everything would be different. And though they still have pound sterling as their currency, if you were there, you would have far less pound sterling than you have here.

The point is, we are not the owner of the wealth in our possession. Everything belongs to God. And so we rob God if we don't give him what we should.

[13:51] And so let's not be like Israel in Malachi's day by not even being aware of this. And by wrongly thinking that what I have belongs to me. And I've worked for it with all of my amazing abilities.

Because our giving or our lack of giving can be a sin that is easily unchecked in our lives. We can be blind to the sin of greed in a way that we're not blind to other sins.

So sins possibly like lust or like adultery, like anger and murder. Where you kind of know when you're committing these sins.

You just know. It's obvious. But greed? Less so. We're obvious of other sins. But greed? Not so much.

I think I've said before that after 18 years in ministry, people have come to me with all kinds of pastoral problems, seeking help for all kinds of things.

[14:53] But nobody's ever come admitting that they struggle with greed. Nobody's ever wanted help in how they deal with their money. In the same way, they've wanted help for all kinds of other things.

And the reason is nobody thinks they've got a problem with money. We might think, yeah, those rich people, they've got a problem with money. They're greedy. But nobody ever thinks it's them. And yet, the weight of the Bible's teaching on money does suggest it's a problem for all of us. It's interesting when you read the Gospels and you see what Jesus said.

Jesus said more about money than about any other subject. More about money than he did about sex. More about money than he did about hell. More about money than he even did about salvation. It's no wonder Jesus said, Watch out. Be on your guard against all kinds of greed. And the reason Jesus says, Watch out, is because we too could be guilty of robbing God.

[16:01] And so that's the first point, how we rob God. The second point is what we should give God. So God's answer here in Malachi is the tithe. Look at verse 10 again.

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. So Israel was robbing God because they weren't giving him the whole tithe.

Now, why a tithe? Why give God a tenth? Well, this is the way God had arranged it. And so it first occurs in the Bible with Abraham, who gave Melchizedek, the priest, a tenth of everything.

Then comes up again in Genesis later on when Jacob vowed to God, promising he'd give God a tenth of all that God gave to him. And so this is before the law of Moses came into effect.

But then with Moses, the tithe became compulsory in God's law, where a tenth of the land's produce belonged to the Lord. And so this was a standard that was embodied in God's covenant law all through Deuteronomy.

[17:11] It was part of life for God's people. They did life by giving God a tenth of what God had blessed them with. And so what was the tithe for? Well, in the Old Testament, it was for three main things.

Firstly, the tithe supported the ministry of the priests and the Levites. Secondly, the tithe supported the poor. And then thirdly, the tithe supported God's people to come together and to celebrate in God's presence.

And so God had set up their life in such a way that the tithe was necessary for the spiritual, for the material, for the social flourishing of the people, of the community of Israel.

And that's why they're commanded to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. When God speaks about my house, he's referring to the temple.

And when he speaks about the storehouse, that's referring to the temple treasury, the place where all the money would go, all the food, the produce, the wine and the oil and everything else would be stored in the temple treasury in the storehouse.

[18:20] And so the tithe was more than just money. And it was all supposed to fund the spiritual and the social ministry of the temple. And so you can guess what happened when the tithe did not come in or when people didn't give.

Well, God was robbed, obviously, but worship was diminished and people suffered. The foreigners, the widows, and the orphans.

So God challenges his people to give the whole tithe. Halfway through verse 10, he says, Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be enough room to store it.

I will prevent pests from devouring your crops and the vines in your fields. Will not drop their fruit before it is ripe, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.

So God's saying here to his people, Test me. So if you tithe, he's telling them, then you will experience my blessing instead of experiencing my curse.

[19:31] And so his test to the people is not test God to get more wealth, but test God to prove his covenant faithfulness.

To see how their giving to God wouldn't mean that they had less, but actually they discover that they were blessed with even more. And so testing God was also a test of the people's faith.

It was an opportunity for them to obey God to see how he would shower his abundant blessing on them. And so their land would be so bountiful and beautiful that all the nations would look on and they would realize that God had blessed this people, the Israelites.

And so this was a challenge to them in terms of their giving. But I think it's still a challenge for people today because like the people in Malachi's day, we probably fear that if we give and if we give generously, then it means we are left with less.

But God says, test me in this. Give as you ought and just see if my blessing won't come upon you. [ 20 : 48 ] I wonder, do we really trust that God's investment management, which is counterintuitive to our own investment management, I wonder if we really trust that it does actually give a higher yield.

Because it does. But we'll never discover that higher yield until we generously give. In other words, giving generously to God, no matter how costly it may be, means that we are never, ever shortchanged.

We never go with less. We never experience less of God's blessing because of what we give. We always experience more. I wonder if we trust that.

That's what God promises to his people here in Malachi. And so we've come so far, and I guess the question that everybody wants an answer to is, well, are Christians still obliged to tithe today?

Because it's clear here in the Old Testament that they were obliged to tithe, but what about now? Well, some suggest that Christians are no longer under any obligation to tithe because we're no longer obligated to keep many of the Old Testament laws, which were specific to the nation of Israel.

[ 22 : 05 ] After all, there is no specific command to tithe, so surely we're just free to give as we see fit. I mean, it seems legalistic, doesn't it, to expect New Testament Christians to keep Old Testament laws.

But here's the thing. We should tithe. And not because I say so, but because Jesus says so. Jesus does speak about tithing.

It comes up in a conversation that Jesus has with the Pharisees in the Gospels. You find it in Matthew 23, 23 and Luke 11, 42. This is Luke 11, 42.

Jesus says, Woe to you Pharisees because you give God a tenth of your mint, 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. So what's he saying? Well, first of all, Jesus is saying the Pharisees were so legalistic that they tithe the tenth out of the spice racks in their kitchen.

[ 23 : 15 ] So they divided it up and gave a tenth to the temple. That's how particularly thought they needed to be in obeying God. And they thought that if they tithed in that way, then, well, we're obeying God because we're giving a tenth.

God is surely pleased with us. Scrupulous tithing. But Jesus rebukes them because, well, yes, they were tithing out of their spices, but he says you're neglecting justice and love.

So Jesus tells them they should be practicing justice and love not instead of tithing but as well as tithing. So Jesus expects that they'll be tithing anyway, but they also needed to be just and to be loving.

And so he says you should have practiced the latter, meaning justice and love, without leaving the former undone, meaning tithing. Jesus says don't stop tithing, but you do need to practice justice and love.

And so this is surely significant when it comes to tithing, right? Jesus expects that we'll be doing it anyway. And that's probably why there's no need for a command for it.

[ 24 : 32 ] It's an expectation. Jesus expects God's people to be just and to be loving as well as give a tithe of our wealth to God.

After all, the Lord does not change, does he? And so this makes sense, doesn't it? Why would we expect to be less generous than the people of Israel when God has revealed much more of his grace towards us in Jesus Christ?

After all, in the New Testament, we're now called to offer our bodies as living sacrifices to God in Romans 12, verse 1. So that is giving God 100%, isn't it?

Your body, a living sacrifice, that's all of you and all of your wealth devoted to God, which means we can't really ever be thinking that 10% is too much, can we?

That's less than HMRC collect from you. I know because I've been doing my ministerial tax return this week. But unlike HMRC who just collect the money and they take it, God would rather we give generously because we're told that God loves a cheerful giver.

[ 25 : 50 ] So a tithe, 10%, is basically the standard of our giving. It's the benchmark, if you like, not legalistically, but practically.

It's a helpful guide to our giving to God. More of a floor than a ceiling. And so if you're a new believer and you haven't started giving yet and you want to know a good place to start, then God gives us the tithe.

That's a good place to start. And so if that is what we should give, then the next question is, well, how should we give it or what should we give to? Where should our giving go?

Well, God told the people here in Malachi to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse of the temple. So the question is, well, does that mean the whole tithe must go to our church?

Well, not necessarily because the temple storehouse didn't exactly or doesn't exactly equate with the local church today. Israel had one temple.

[ 26 : 56 ] And so all the giving was channeled through the temple. It all came through the temple doors into the storehouse, the temple treasury, so that it could then go out to benefit everyone in society.

But no one church can do all of that today. And so the temple was basically like the worship center and the welfare state all rolled into one.

And so the tithe was essential. essential to carry out the worship and the ministry and the temple, but also essential for the social good of the people and society.

And so as we read the New Testament, these are still the basic giving priorities for the church. So while our local church is where our giving should be channeled, it's clear that one local church can't do everything.

and yet because the local church is God's primary means for carrying out his mission and his work in the world, our local church is likely to be the place where the majority of our tithe will go because our local church should be supporting God's work and ministry and the place where it is.

[ 28 : 12 ] It should be supporting the poor through mercy ministries. It should be supporting local ministry to the people around about. It should be supporting global missionaries, mission by supporting mission race.

It should be supporting church planting. All of these things are what the local church should be doing and so the majority of the tithe will go there because it can go out to support these other works.

And yet at the same time, we will all have burdens and passions and desires for different aspects, of God's work in this world, all of which can't be done through one church and so we'll want to give to these different ministries as well.

And so essentially, Malachi highlights the principle. The principle is what we should give, which is a tithe, but we need to work out where we should give, what we should give to, where the needs are. Okay, so first, how we rob God. Second, what we should give God, and then thirdly and finally, how we can give. So we've seen how we rob God and what we should give God.

[ 29 : 25 ] Let's finish with how we can give. What is going to make us give? You, me, what will make us give? Is it being made to feel guilty about not giving enough?

Well, that might work for a while, of course, but it doesn't ever last. And so we need much more than a simple guilt trip made to feel bad about giving.

But we already have the best possible motivation to give, and it is the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ. What is going to motivate us to give generously is the one who gave up everything for us. And this is how the Apostle Paul encourages the Christians to give in 2 Corinthians 8 and 9. He wanted the church to be generous in their giving to God's work.

But he didn't command them to give. He didn't say, I'm the Apostle Paul, and I'm telling you, this is how much you should give and where it needs to go. No, instead, he did a simple, basic thing.

[ 30 : 31 ] He reminded the people, the church, of what Jesus Christ had done for them. He wrote this, For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich.

So what Paul did was he brought the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ to bear on their giving by reminding them of the extravagant generosity of Jesus Christ.

Jesus was rich, but for your sake he became poor by giving up his life on a cross. And so now, through his death, we become rich by receiving salvation, which is the everlasting treasure.

Paul's reminding them as he reminds us, Jesus didn't hold back anything for you. And so when we trust in Jesus, we become truly rich with something far more valuable than money.

And that's why, if you ever read the Sunday Times Rich List, which is published every year, it just calculates wealth in completely the wrong way. Because it is in knowing Jesus as our Lord and Savior that we discover that we have got the most secure investment in all eternity.

[ 31 : 54 ] opportunity. And that investment is the ultimate solution to the greed in our hearts and to our stinginess when it comes to our giving.

And that's the only way, the gospel of grace, the gospel of Jesus Christ, is the only way to stop ourselves from robbing God. God. Because when we have these infinite riches as a child of God, it frees us up to give generously and to want to give generously out of gratitude for all that God has done for us in Jesus Christ.

And so we don't need to fear that our giving means going without. We should test the Lord with our giving, trusting that he will not only provide for us when we give generously, but he will also bless us.

For it is more blessed to give than to receive. And so when Jesus changes your heart and your hands, don't tightly grasp hold of the money God's already given you, but instead they open up and generously give away.

Giving it to God for the work of his kingdom. Because giving to God's kingdom, investing in it is the best investment because it's the only investment that lasts for all eternity.

[ 33 : 20 ] Let's pray. .