

Malachi's Appeal To Backsliders (Part Three)

Malachi 2:17 to 3:12

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In my two previous sermons, I highlighted certain biblical principles in the book of Malachi, which I am going to continue to do today. We begin with the shocking element of judgment. It was shocking in that the people of Malachi's time did not think God was capable of justice. They sneered, "Where is the God of justice?"

The Lord's emphasis in Malachi is both an appeal to backsliders to repent and a warning of judgment. People will find that God's process of separating the saved from the condemned will yield some surprises. The indication of the inspired written Word of God is that many will be shocked when they are barred from entering into glory.

Their presumption gives way to astonishment and disbelief when Jesus Christ dismisses them with the cutting words, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers."

To emphasize this somber truth, several of Christ's Kingdom parables present a group or individual who was initially in a place of special privilege, being excluded at the end. In the Gospels, Jesus Christ's emphasis on the sifting at the final judgment was meant to again warn descendants of Israel and Christians against becoming complacent about their relationship with God.

In the Parable of the Ten Virgins, the familiar tone "Lord! Lord!" which is used by the foolish virgins when they request entry into the wedding banquet, indicates that they fully expect to be let in. Instead, the bridegroom, symbolizing Jesus at His second coming, rebuffs them saying: "I tell you the truth, I do not know you."

The extent to which many are surprised at God's verdict serves as a dreadful testimony to the degree of Satan's success in passing on counterfeit truth.

Now leading up to this warning of judgment by Malachi, the people were indicted for their treachery in divorcing the wives of their youth in order to marry foreign women, as we saw last time in Malachi 2:10-16.

In response to their questioning the justice of God, they receive a promise of the Messiah's coming, but also a warning of the judgment that He will bring.

Between the portion of Malachi 2 that deals with the sin of the people in divorcing their spouses and marrying unbelievers, and the part of Malachi 3 that deals with their sin of robbing God of tithes and other obligations, there is this section dealing with the coming of the Lord in judgment. We will read Malachi 2:17-3:5. My Bible has this section entitled: "The Lord will judge at His coming."

Malachi 2:17 You have wearied the Lord with your words; yet you say, "In what way have we wearied Him?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them," or, "Where is the God of justice?"

Malachi 3:1-5 “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me. and the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts. “But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like launderers’ soap [Both of those are cleaning agents.]. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant to the Lord, as in the days of old, as in former years. And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, and against those who turn away an alien—because they do not fear Me,” Says the Lord of hosts.

But the coming of God is not the initial thrust of the passage. It begins with the people’s complaint that God’s rule is not just. God replies that He is just, but that His coming in justice will mean judgment for the very people who are raising this objection.

Seven times in this book God makes a statement, either directly or indirectly, critical of the people. The people reply by challenging the statement. Generally, their challenge begins with the word “how,” though in some translations the same Hebrew word is rendered “in what way.”

In Malachi 1:2 God tells the people, “I have loved you.” Is there anything more wonderful than God telling you that He loves us [you]? This statement of fact, “I have loved you,” is also a veiled criticism of the people’s indifference to God’s love for them in this context. They respond by asking, “How have you loved us?”

God’s love surrounds them in spite of their halfhearted devotion and open sin, but they are so insensitive to that love that they actually consider God remiss in His favors. They think He has not loved them to the degree that He should. So they have made themselves the judge.

Now the second and third exchanges occur in verse 6 later where God says: “It is you, priests [or ministers], who show contempt for My name.” The priests reply, “How have we shown contempt for Your name?”

So whether the people got that attitude from the priests or vice versa does not matter, they all had the same attitude toward God.

God answers them saying: “You place defiled food on My altar!” Today He might say: “You have offered false doctrine to My church!” Remember that this is a prophesy and it is applicable to us today as well. Now they rejected this explanation in spite of the fact that they have been offering blind, crippled, and diseased animals, and answered God, “How have we defiled You?” God answers in verse 7.

Malachi 1:7 “You offer defiled food on My altar, but say, ‘In what way have we defiled You?’ By saying, ‘The table of the Lord is contemptible.’”

We find this same type of exchange beginning in Malachi 2:17, where it says that the people “have wearied the Lord with their words.” And their reply is, “How have we wearied Him?” How indeed?

When we see the word “wearied” we think of repetitious entreaties that tire the person hearing them. As it turns out, it is not so much the repetitiousness, but rather the nature of the complaints that bother God.

God is offended that the people accuse Him of injustice. Their accusation against God is, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and He is pleased with them.” They think that evildoers prosper materially and the wicked get rich.

By contrast, they imply, “We who do good [and note here that they considered themselves to have been quite good] are evil in the eyes of the Lord, and He is not pleased with us.” What they mean is, “We’re not getting rich. Where is the God of justice?” Does that not sound like people today? Something goes wrong and they immediately accuse God or blame someone else, or indirectly blame God because things are not going well for them financially.

We need to see two things about accusing God of injustice. First, it is that it horribly arrogant. It demands that the only wise, holy, omniscient, sovereign God of the universe come down to our level and defend Himself before our petty human standards of justice. That is a terrible thing to be guilty of!

God was managing the universe quite well long before we were even born. He raises nations up and brings nations down. He imposes judgment upon individuals through the inevitable out-workings of sin in their lives and the lives of those with whom they come in contact. God does all this perfectly without our help.

Yet when something does not go the way we like, we immediately accuse God of injustice and call Him to account for it. This is the attitude that mankind has toward God and sometimes God’s people slip into that way of thinking as well unfortunately. So we have to be very careful of that.

Secondly, accusing God of injustice is distressingly frequent, in their case. We see this at the beginning of the Old Testament. In Genesis 3:11-12, when Adam and Eve sinned and God came to them in the Garden, asking, “Have you eaten from the tree that I commanded you not to eat from?” Adam replied, “The woman you put here with me—she gave me some fruit from the tree and I ate it.”

In a similar way in verse 13, when God asked the woman, “What is this you have done?” she replied, “The serpent deceived me, and I ate.” On the surface these statements seem to be honest admissions of guilt, but beneath the surface Adam and Eve were doing their best to shift the blame.

Eve tried to implicate the Serpent. “True I ate it, but the Devil made me do it,” was her excuse. Furthermore, although the woman did not say so openly, she too was blaming God. Eve blamed the Devil, but was that reply any different from Adam’s? Not really! We see the similarity of the two excuses when we ask: but who made the Devil? Or, who let the Devil into the garden? Every attempt to excuse ourselves is in the final analysis an attempt to blame God.

What troubles do you have that you might blame God for? Is it circumstances? God made those circumstances. Is it other people? God made other people. Whatever it may be, think about whether

or not you are indirectly blaming God. Without realizing it we are shifting the blame from ourselves and blaming God in the process.

God made other people and has permitted them to come into your life and if you do not admit your own guilt in a matter, or at least acknowledge that God may be delaying the full execution of His justice for reasons that seem both wise and right to Him, then you are saying that God acts sinfully. You are basically saying, as the people of Malachi's day did, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them."

Now Christians affirm that God is a God of justice, but we all know that injustices occur in this life. We believe that God will judge all evil one day, but in the meantime the evil do prosper; the righteous sometimes are afflicted; and seeming evils go unchecked. What are we to make of this? The next verses deal with that question.

They make two points. First is that God is coming and there will be a judgment. Second is that all evildoers will be judged, including those who object to God's management of the world's affairs.

The unspoken inference of these first points is that, if God does not come in judgment immediately, it is because He is a God of grace as well as a God of justice. He has not come in judgment because if He were to come nobody could possibly stand before Him. All would perish; all would be consigned to the Lake of Fire.

It is important to see what God promises to do. First, He promises to send His "messenger." The last book of the Old Testament concludes with a dramatic prophecy of the coming of the Lord and John the Baptizer.

Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming," says the Lord of hosts.

It is interesting that in the Hebrew the phrase translated "My messenger" is actually the word Malachi, the name of the prophet. But Malachi is not thinking of himself when he records this important promise of God. The words "prepare the way before Me" are a clue that Malachi is thinking of Isaiah's well-known prophecy in Isaiah 40.

Isaiah 40:3-5 The voice of the one crying in the wilderness; prepare the way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted and every mountain and hill brought low; the crooked places shall be made straight and the rough places smooth; the glory of the Lord shall be revealed and all flesh shall see it together; for the mouth of the Lord has spoken."

This is the messenger who was to prepare for God's Messiah, and we have the united witness of the four Gospel writers who declare that Isaiah 40:3 was fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist, the forerunner of Jesus Christ.

Each of the four Gospel writers quotes at least part of this text: Matthew 3:3; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23. Matthew also quotes the text from Malachi, thus linking the two pronouncements.

Matthew 11:10 “For this is he of whom it is written: ‘Behold, I send My messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’

In each case the messenger is identified as John the Baptist.

The second thing God promises is to come Himself. This is an astonishing promise, of course.

It is one thing for God to send a messenger and that is what God had been doing for many hundreds of years. He had sent messengers like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. He had sent the so-called Minor Prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah.

Now, in the context, He is sending Malachi, and He is promising to send John the Baptist also. They were all great messengers, great gifts to God’s people. But they were men after all and it is not all that extraordinary that God would communicate with His people by this means.

Looking through church history we can see that was the case ever since Jesus Christ worked with His disciples and the ministers that followed down through the ages. But now the truly incredible thing is that God is promising to dispense with the messengers and come Himself. We see that again in verse 1 of Malachi 3, which speaks of His first coming.

Malachi 3:1 “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight, behold, He is coming,” says the Lord of hosts.

Surprising as this is, it is nevertheless exactly what Isaiah had declared earlier in Isaiah 40:3. It is what John the Baptist had in mind when he said:

Matthew 3:11 “I indeed baptize you with water unto repentance, but He who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.”

There you have John the Baptist proclaiming the coming of Jesus Christ, the Messiah. John knew who Jesus was; they were cousins. At the occasion of Jesus’ baptism by John himself, John declared unequivocally, “I have seen and testified that this is the Son of God.”

These texts are testimony to the deity of Jesus Christ. There are other things that attest to Jesus’ deity, of course. There was the voice from heaven at the baptism and again on the Mount of Transfiguration. “This is My Son, whom I love; with Him I am well pleased.” There were Christ’s own claims in John 10.

John 10:30 “I and My Father are one.”

John 14:9 Jesus said to Him, “I been with you so long, and yet you have not known Me, Philip? He who has seen Me has seen the Father, so how can you say, ‘Show us the Father’?”

There were the miracles and the resurrection. But among these many claims and evidences, the great Old Testament prophecies stand out. The fact that these prophecies have been fulfilled, proves the Bible's reliability. It is something that we can rely on absolutely without any doubt.

At this point another remarkable thing happens, and it is even more remarkable than the prophecy that God will Himself come to His temple. To see it, we have to reconstruct the reasoning thus far. Malachi began with the complaint of the people that God had been unjust in withholding what they considered their proper measure of material blessings.

Even worse, they had accused Him of favoring evildoers. "Where is the God of justice?" they complained. To this God replied that, although His coming had been long delayed, it had nevertheless not been canceled. "Where is the God of justice?" These verses teach that the God of justice is coming!

So what should we expect at this point? The people had asked for, even demanded, justice and so justice is what they would get. The God of justice who is also the God of judgment would come, destroy their land, obliterate their city, and confine every last one of them to death for their wickedness. It is true that God does speak of judgment.

Malachi 3:5 And I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and orphans, and against those who turn away an alien—because they do not fear Me," says the Lord of hosts.

But even here, although God says that He is coming in judgment, he is only coming near them and it is only to testify against sinners. And the verses that come before this speak, not of a final judgment that results in men and women receiving the final death at the White Throne judgment, but of a purification process in which the priests and Levites will be refined like gold and silver.

Malachi 3:3-4 "He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasant to the Lord, as in the days of old, as in former years."

According to this image, God will be like a refiner of silver. Workers of silver can be seen today in Oriental bazaars, and even in some cases, in the United States in different tourist spots. They melt the ore with small, portable furnaces and as the ore melts, the dross rises to the top and is then scraped off by the refiner. The workman keeps peering into the crucible, removing dross until he can see his face in the molten metal, as in a mirror, and knows that the work is done.

In such a manner, God will apply the heat of affliction and discipline until he sees His image in His people. He is doing the same thing with us today. It is one of the reasons that we are afflicted and have trials at times, because God is the refiner who is refining us. That is a great blessing although it is hard when we are going through it.

In spite of the people's demand for justice, when God would come to His people in the person of His Son, Jesus Christ, it would not be for an immediate judgment on sin, however much they deserved it, but for God's own gracious work of redemption. He would come to seek and to save the lost, to bring healing, and to purify His elect people. Only after that gracious work would the judgment come.

Jesus Christ Himself taught this when He eventually came, four hundred years after the age of Malachi. Jesus had returned to Nazareth after His baptism by John and His temptation by Satan, to begin His ministry, and He went into the synagogue of Nazareth on the Sabbath.

He was asked to take part in the service and was given the scroll of Isaiah from which He was to read the day's lesson. He unrolled it, found Isaiah 61:1-2 and read it. Luke records this incident.

Luke 4:18-19 The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me, because He has anointed Me to preach the gospel to the poor; He has sent Me to heal the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord."

Jesus then announced that this remarkable prophecy had been fulfilled in Himself. He was the One who had come to do these things, as God had promised. But the most remarkable thing about Jesus' handling of this passage is what He did not read.

If you look at Isaiah 61:2, you find that the very next line of the prophecy, the completion of the sentence with which Jesus stopped, says:

Isaiah 61:2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God.

He did not say that in the synagogue at that time because that was *not* the day of vengeance, it was the *day of salvation* for specific people that He would call, and it has continued down through the ages to this day in His church.

One day it—the judgment—will come, but it did not come with Jesus' first appearing. Actually, by His very citation of this prophecy, He indicated that a day or time of grace would precede the final judgment.

We should never say, as the Israelite's did, "Where is the God of justice?" We should never ask for judgment. If God is as omnipotent, omniscient, and caring for us as we imagine Him to be, why does He not speak overtly today as He did in those ancient times?

He spoke in the past through prophets. From time to time there was even a voice from heaven. Even faithful saints today would like a whisper of explanation in moments of personal suffering, a pointed direct word in crisis, a shout of vindication when non-Christians seem to have the upper hand. Yet God does not speak openly today, at least not in those ways.

We are reminded of the four hundred silent years that intervened between the words of God through Malachi and the coming of John the Baptist and Jesus Christ. But since the time of Jesus nearly two thousand years (five times the silent period of four hundred years between Malachi and Jesus Christ) have gone by. Why is God silent in this way? Why does the God of all the universe not speak?

God has already spoken through His prophets, Jesus Christ, and His apostles and everything we need to know is in His inspired written Word. Anything else He wants us to know or do is given through direct inspiration as answered prayer or by inspiration through His servants and in our personal Bible study and inspiration. It is revealed to us through His Holy Spirit which gives us the power to be able to understand it.

Now, we come to verses which send an interwoven message of warning and encouragement to make the strong point that even though God's people rebel and become deceived and confused, He still gives them the opportunity to repent of their sins and return to a relationship with Him.

Malachi 3:6-7 "For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob. 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?'"

They thought that they were already connected with Him and already had a great relationship with Him because they were so good.

According to Malachi, the people were guilty of many serious sins. The priests were offering blemished animals in a formal but insincere religious ritualism. Many were divorcing their wives to marry unbelieving women. Most had been disobeying God's laws by withholding tithes. And they were all accusing God of loving them only halfheartedly and of being unjust in His dealings with them, because He had not prospered them adequately according to their standards.

If they could have put their feelings into words, other than those recorded by Malachi, they might have said: "We've been entirely faithful in fulfilling our responsibilities toward God. Never mind the divorces and mixed marriages. Never mind the unpaid tithes. We keep our side of the bargain through many things that seem important to us. The problem is that God hasn't yet kept His side of the bargain. We have been faithful; He is unfaithful. In short, obedience to God doesn't work. God hasn't prospered us as we think He should, and the fault is God's alone."

That is basically what mainstream Christianity is saying today. We hear so many people claim that they are Christian, yet they do not even know anything about what the Bible instructs.

The answer, of course, is that God had not changed. It is the people who had changed, falling away from a true love for Him and from the truly righteous life their forefathers once had. But in another sense, the problem is that in reality the people had changed from sin so little that they did not even recognize that they had not come out of it.

Though fallen from their original, early devotion to God, they were nevertheless exactly as they had been for much of their history. They were exceedingly sinful and self-righteous, and they needed to repent, and God gave them every opportunity to.

The purpose of the statement: "For I am the Lord, I do not change," is that His purpose never changes. He says, "Because I am God, and I never change, you Jacob [meaning Israel] are not burned up by the refiner's fire, or I would have done that a long time ago."

There is a New Testament scripture that is similar to this, but its intent is slightly different from Malachi 3:6. We find it in Hebrews 13 where it says:

Hebrews 13:8 Jesus Christ is the same yesterday, today, and forever.

That is a statement that we can absolutely rely on and have faith in. Now what are the specific areas in which God does not change? This is referring to His personal character which does not change.

We have scriptural proof of two conditions that are unchangeable. One is that His purpose never changes, and the other is that His personal character never changes. God is immutable; which means that, being perfect, God cannot and does not change.

Think of it this way. In order to change, a moral being must change in either of two ways. Either he must change for the better, or he must change for the worse. God cannot get better, because that would mean that He was less than perfect earlier, in which case He would not have been God. But God can not get worse either, because in that case He would become imperfect, which He cannot be. God is and must remain perfect in all His attributes.

Malachi 3:6 is a classic statement of immutability: “For I am the Lord, I do not change.” Now why does God mention this particular doctrine here in the middle of a prophesy from Malachi?

It would be a valid explanation of this verse to list every one of God’s attributes and show how God does not change in any of them. Attributes like: sovereignty, wisdom, holiness, omnipotence, knowledge, and justice. But the relevant attributes here are His: love, mercy, grace, and faithfulness.

Malachi 3:6 says that it is because of God’s immutability in these areas that the people have not been destroyed. At first glance this is surprising, because the theme of the preceding verses has been the people’s complaint: “Where is the God of justice?”

In such a context, if God replies that He has not changed, we should expect Him to mean, “I have not changed in My demand for justice, and I will judge the ungodly.” Instead, we find that the emphasis is on His grace and mercy here.

Even when we were looking at the previous verses, we saw that God was coming, not to judge, but to save His people. The messenger was to prepare the way for Jesus, who would redeem and purify them. We find the same thing here. God emphasizes His immutability to say that He is unchanging in His faithfulness, which is why the people have not been destroyed for their transgressions, even with how wicked and despicable they had become. And this is the same reason God has not destroyed this nation yet—because of His mercy. But He will eventually pass that judgment.

God is wonderfully gracious! The people were accusing Him of changing, of having become unfaithful. God replies that He is unchanging precisely in His faithfulness, which is why these very people had not been cast off.

It is this unchangeableness of God that gives us an opportunity to change. And of course that is what we must do. It is why verse 7 of Malachi 3 goes on to speak of repentance or returning to God.

Malachi 3:7 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?’

The people of Malachi’s day asked, “How are we to return?” And God’s response to them in the first instance was that they had robbed him of tithes and offerings. As you know, the word tithe means “tenth.” It refers to that tenth of the people’s produce, labor, increase, or income that is owed to God.

Keeping the Sabbath is a test commandment of whether we are willing to give up what we want to do and turn our attention to honor and worship our Sovereign God. Tithing is a test as well. Both the

Sabbath and tithing are assessments of whether or not we will put God first. Will we be honest and good stewards of God's gracious provision for us?

The people of Malachi's day were robbing God of the tithes and offerings due Him, but God is ready to bless them with abundance if they will put Him first. Since Malachi is a prophecy with biblical principles for our time, we must take these things to heart today.

Malachi 3:8-12 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation. 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. 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; "and all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts.

Since it is apparent that many members of God's church have a tendency to parallel trends in the mainstream religious world, I think it will be helpful to take note of what has been found in researching the habits of American religious donors. I found this encouraging, but also telling.

According to the "Church Finance Today" newsletter, published by Christianity Today:

Barna research estimates that five percent of Americans donate ten percent or more to religious causes. Without this group of faithful and generous givers, most churches and ministries would quickly be forced to close their doors. Until recently, no in-depth research had ever been conducted to find out about the financial, giving, and spiritual practices of this consistently generous group. Now, after five years of State of the Plate research conducted by MAXIMUM Generosity ministry, along with Christianity Today, ECFA, Evangelical Christian Credit Union, we have data that provides invaluable insights on the financial, giving, and spiritual practices of 4,412 people from all fifty states and more than seventy countries.

This is a worldwide survey that they took here. Now here are some notable highlights from this research showing "truths about tithers."

"Those who give ten percent or more started doing so at a young age. Sixty-three percent started giving ten percent or more between childhood and their twenties."

I might add to that children who earn money and have an increase should be tithing. College students who are working should tithe as well, regardless of their dire financial situation.

"People that give ten percent or more are better off financially than those Christians who do not. In every category we measured, faithful and generous giving led to greater financial health in people's lives."

"What keeps 'non-tithing Christians' from giving? Thirty-eight percent say they cannot afford it; and thirty-three percent say they have too much debt."

Oftentimes having too much debt means that you overspend, which means that you spend God's money as well as your own. Continuing on with one final quote from this article here:

“Just as a car must have all pistons firing properly to move smoothly down the road, so churches must have all the “generosity” pistons firing in their ministry. But most church giving is stuck in what is called the “Rule of Thirds”: one third never give; one third give less than \$500 per year; and one third give more than \$500 per year.”

That is a picture of the religious, or mainstream Christian world. From Genesis to Revelation, tithing is the only financial system God endorses. Was the law of tithing in effect before the Old Covenant and law of Moses?

Genesis 14:18-20 Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High. And he blessed him and said: “Blessed be Abram of God Most High, possessor of heaven and earth; and blessed be God Most High, who has delivered your enemies into your hand.” And he [Abram] gave him [Melchizedek, the priest of the Most High] a tithe of all.

This scripture shows that Abraham knew about tithing; which means Isaac and Jacob knew about tithing, because Abraham would have certainly taught them to do so. All three are faithful patriarchs and would have had to do that in order to be faithful.

Jacob was taught about tithing by his grandfather, Abraham, and his father, Isaac. Genesis 14 succinctly reveals several principles of tithing, I will list four here:

- 1) The tithe goes to God through His representative, the priest, the minister. or the ministry—the church.
- 2) The Bible repeats that it is one-tenth. Not a fraction of a tenth, but one-tenth.
- 3) This law was in effect long before God commanded it through Moses, as we just saw here in Genesis 14.
- 4) Abram, blessed for his faithfulness to God, gave tithes in recognition of God's rulership and providence, and he was thankful for that.

It is upon this authority that the tithing law applies to us today. The law of tithing was not changed. We find the greatest evidence that we are to tithe in Hebrews 7, where the apostle Paul uses tithing as an illustration to show that the Melchizedek priesthood supplanted the Levitical priesthood upon the resurrection and ascension of our High Priest, Jesus Christ. We will read Hebrews 7:1-10, which parallels Genesis 14:17-20.

Hebrews 7:1-10 For this Melchizedek, king of Salem, priest of the Most High God, who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him, to whom also Abraham gave a tenth part of all, first being translated “king of righteousness,” and then also king of Salem, meaning “king of peace,” without father, without mother, without genealogy, having neither beginning of days nor end of life, but made like the Son of God, remains a priest continually. Now consider how great this man was, to whom even the patriarch Abraham gave a tenth of the spoils. And indeed those who are of the sons

of Levi, who receive the priesthood, have a commandment to receive tithes from the people according to the law, that is, from their brethren, though they have come from the loins of Abraham; but he whose genealogy is not derived from them received tithes from Abraham and blessed him who had the promises [that is Jesus, spokesman of the Old Testament]. Now beyond all contradiction the lesser is blessed by the better. Here mortal men receive tithes, but there he receives them, of whom it is witnessed that he lives. Even Levi, who receives tithes, paid tithes through Abraham, so to speak, for he was still in the loins of his father when Melchizedek met him.

All Levitical authorities and responsibilities, which would include receiving tithes, have transferred to Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the church. Jesus gives authority to His ministers to conduct His work on earth in His stead under His management.

An essential principle to remember concerning the Old and New Covenants is that what did not originate with the Old Covenant did not die with it. Since the tithing law predates the Levitical priesthood, and is thus still enforced, tithes are now to be given to Jesus Christ, our High Priest, for use by the church.

The church is commissioned to preach the gospel free of charge. The tithe pays for this essential responsibility. Any church on earth that charges for God's material is probably not one of God's true churches.

Why did Jesus Christ not specifically deal with the tithing law while He was standing on this earth? Jesus magnified God's law while on earth. In His Sermon on the Mount, He paraphrased six Old Testament laws, elaborating on the spiritual application of their principles. He gave their intended meanings. Tithing, however, was not generally questioned at the time. It was generally understood that it was what you were to do. God commanded you do it and you do it. It was not even an issue.

The New Testament expounds Old Testament principles and laws, and Jesus specifically says He did not come to invalidate them. No New Testament passage rescinds the tithing law. Quite the opposite, Jesus upholds the principle in His denunciation of the self-righteous Pharisees.

Matthew 23:23 "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. These you ought to have done, without leaving the others undone [That is without leaving tithing undone]."

In His denunciation of the Pharisees, Jesus does not condemn tithing, or even careful observance of it. Instead, He denounces their lack of justice, mercy, and faith. To the contrary, He supports tithing: "These you ought to have done [justice, mercy, and faith], without leaving the others [like tithing] undone."

Jesus Christ, the Lord of the Old Testament, has always been the same and always will be the same in ruling and living righteously. He does not change His mind. In carrying out and administering the tithing law we also have to remember the weightier matters of the law: justice, mercy, and faith.

Anyone who does not tithe of his increase, his profit, is stealing from God. And any head of household who does not give God free-will offerings on the seven annual holy days is cheating God. Both tithes and offerings are commanded. Thank offerings can also be given at undesignated times of the year, when special blessings are received.

A specific rate of ten percent is required in tithing, otherwise, it can not be called "tithing." And freewill amounts of one's own choosing are necessary in giving offerings.

The principle involved in tithing is two-fold. First, to recognize that God has given us everything we have. He created us and He sustains us. He is so generous that He only expects a small portion back. Not because He needs it, but because we grow spiritually in faith and obedience to the Most High God in doing so.

Second, it is a test to show God and us where we stand in our relationship with Him. Is our obedience to God a preference or conviction, that we give God what is His? We know our hearts partially, but God knows our hearts completely.

I want to take a brief look at the tithing and giving paradox. We know that biblical principles work in life whether someone is a believer or an unbeliever. There are inherent blessings that come from even partially right living. Even when a person does not realize that he is adhering to a biblical principle in small areas of his life, he still receives the associated blessing that automatically comes with right action.

Have you thought about the paradox that the wealthiest nation in the world, the United States, is also the only nation infatuated with giving money away? This is not only true individually, but it is also the case nationally. Invariably, the United States charitable and faith-based organizations send generous assistance wherever needed. Seldom do similar levels of assistance arrive from other countries.

We became wealthy as a nation because we were indoctrinated with a culture of charity and in the original articles of our national establishment for independence and unification, expressions of biblical morality, including a commitment to charity, are enshrined in the founding documents of the United States of America. These documents were upheld by men like James Madison.

In 1778, James Madison, who later became the fourth President of the United States, realized that very thing and said: "We have staked the whole future of American civilization, not upon the power of government, far from it. We have staked the future upon the capacity of each and all of us to govern ourselves, to sustain ourselves, according to the Ten Commandments of God."

Although today, the United States is losing some of its love of giving as foreign influences and our sinful degenerating society change the culture we once had, Americans are still somewhat "in love" with the act of giving money away to those who are in need.

This reveals the influence of the Word of God, passed down through the ages through the descendants of Jacob, whose name was changed by God to "Israel." We realize that it also has to do with the blessings (God's promise to Abraham) of this nation and the Israelitish nations today. But this is the Jacob to whom Malachi's prophecy referred.

Malachi 3:6 “For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob.”

The number of nonprofit institutions in America that thrive only on the freewill offerings of their supporters is innumerable. We have countless churches, schools, universities, hospitals, welfare organizations, and other nonprofit organizations that cannot be found in other countries. We in the United States, are imbued with the desire to give away at least a tenth of our money.

America's founding fathers were quite familiar with the Holy Bible. They seem to be aware that in Hebrew language, quite frequently, only one word serves to convey what appear to be two very distinct principles in English. Although one Hebrew word may have two separate ideas, the ideas are not quite so unconnected as they appear at first glance.

The Hebrew root of both the English word “rich” and the English word “ten” or “tenth” look the same in Hebrew. So we see that the idea of wealth is linguistically linked to “ten” or “a tenth.” Both concepts are expressed by one and the same word. In Deuteronomy 14:22 the root word of “tithe” also means “to accumulate.”

Deuteronomy 14:22 “You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces [representing our labor] year by year.”

Tithes accumulate as the result of wealth accumulating, and wealth accumulates as a result of tithing. They cannot be separated. Amazingly, this reveals one of the wonderful righteous principles of God's creation of mankind, the idea of tithing, or giving away one tenth of one's money to others. By linking wealth to the concept of tithing, Hebrew teaches us a wonderfully enigmatic lesson. In a strange way, giving away a tenth of our money actually adds to our wealth.

The area of professional sales shines a light on this extraordinary idea. Most sales professionals choose to be paid a commission instead of a straight salary. This way, the harder and more successfully they work, the more they will earn. Sales professionals are remarkable people and the truly successful ones have a great deal of integrity. Nevertheless, it is the unscrupulous ones, who are in the majority, who give sales a bad rap. Honest salespeople trust their competence and their training and are willing to put themselves on the line. It is not a career for cowards by any means.

The good sales professional has the attitude in an interview with a potential employer that the employer should hire him because he will have nothing to lose. The employer will pay the salesperson only after he has made money for him; and will only take a percentage of what he brings in. Sales professionals are among the most important people who keep the wheels of our economy turning, and a great deal of their motivation stems from the commission system of payment.

The Bible encourages us to view our own means of earning a living as a sort of “commission” arrangement with God. Let me explain this here. God offers an incredible payback plan, a ninety percent commission and He only requires ten percent of every dollar we receive. What salesman out there would not want a ninety percent commission?

The remaining ten percent must be passed on to the big boss by giving it to His designated assignees. That is an authentically American way of viewing our charitable activities. We deserve no medals for giving away ten percent of our money, which in reality is God's money. It did not belong to us in the first place, we are just passing it through to its rightful owners.

The Hebrew language identifies this process of donating ten percent, or tithing, by the same root word we use to indicate wealthy. In other words, paradoxically, this process of taking away from what you have does not leave you with less, but causes you to amass more. It is a totally amazing system! You can see mercy and generosity beyond anything that we can imagine in that.

How can diminishing what we have, by giving it away, produce more for us? To understand this phenomenon, speak to a truly generous philanthropist, or even carefully examine your own charitable history. You will always discover the same startling story. People repeatedly prosper after starting to maintain a regular tithing program.

God shows that blessings accrue to those who faithfully tithe of their increase that He has blessed them with in the first place. Through the tithing system, God provides for the preaching of the gospel and the feeding of His flock. Other tithing funds provide for personal holy day expenses and the needy.

In so doing, faithful tithing expresses love toward God and love toward our neighbor. These laws are still in force today and are important for our personal spiritual growth. Jesus Christ emphasizes the approach God's church should have today.

Matthew 10:8 Heal the sick, cleanse the lepers, raise the dead, cast out demons. Freely you have received, freely give.

Now turn back to Malachi 3 again. What if you are robbing God in tithes and offerings? What is the immediate consequence?

Malachi 3:8-9 “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me, even this whole nation.

What is a curse? The imagery of curse relates generally to three contexts in Scripture: the created order, interpersonal relations, and God's covenant relationship with Israel and the church.

Regarding a creation curse, often the effect of a curse is to be cut off from one's natural community and environment.

Satan, as the serpent, was cursed for deceiving Eve, but Adam experienced the ground being cursed for his sin, and Eve received the punishment of pain in childbirth for eating of the tree, but God did not call it a curse.

Only later, in the case of Cain, does God issue a curse against a person, whereby he is then driven from the land, and presumably his people as well. This curse that alienates Cain from the land prefigures the curse of exile that will be experienced by Israel.

Regarding an interpersonal curse, there are numerous instances where curse is merely a synonym for “taunt” or “slander,” and in this regard, to curse is in effect to turn glory to shame. Notice the cause of King David's reduction to shame here in Psalm 4.

Psalm 4:1-3 Hear me when I call, O God of my righteousness! You have relieved me in my distress; have mercy on me, and hear my prayer. How long, O you sons of men, will

you turn my glory to shame? How long will you love worthlessness and seek falsehood? Selah. But know that the Lord has set apart [sanctified] for Himself him who is godly; the Lord will hear when I call to Him.

If this refers to the rebellion in the time of Absalom, the illusion is to the fact that David's enemies were attempting to rob him of his scepter and his crown; to reduce him to the lowest condition of poverty and destitution. And he asks with earnestness how long they intended to do him so great an injustice and wrong.

In the case of robbing God, the thief taunts and slanders Him, the thief also brings on himself an inherent curse, which results from his sin of robbery. He brings about the curse of shame on himself.

Now regarding a covenant curse, the ultimate curse of exile would mean nothing less than the removal of that which makes Israel glorious, which is the divine presence. This is similar to sin separating sinners from God.

God's appropriate response to disobedience is to produce a curse that threatens to deprive covenant violators of security, freedom, health, and blessings. Within the New Testament we find the sense of curse as constraint and debasement in the imagery of spiritual slavery. Jesus expresses this in verse 34 of John 8 which says:

John 8:34 Jesus answered them, "Most assuredly, I say to you, whoever commits sin is a slave of sin."

Being a slave of sin is a curse and being "cursed with a curse" inflicts all three imageries in the Scriptures:

- 1) The thief is cut off from the spiritual community.
- 2) The thief slanders God and himself; and turns their glory to shame.
- 3) The thief separates himself from God because he is willfully sinning and a slave to it.

We looked at the immediate consequence of robbing God in tithes and offerings, but now what is the ultimate consequence? The New Testament speaks of a final curse, a final judgment, in which those who reject God's salvation perish in their separation from God.

I Corinthians 6:9-11 Do you not know that the unrighteous will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived. Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor homosexuals, nor sodomites, nor thieves [robbing God of tithes], nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners will inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you. But [since you stopped doing these things] you were washed, but you were sanctified, but you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus and by the Spirit of our God.

So according to the scriptures here, those who steal God's tithe and rob Him of offerings will not inherit the Kingdom of God, unless they repent.

The end of this matter is that not merely our money or time, but our whole selves are God's, and therefore, we are to honor God wholly with all that we are. The apostle Paul wrote in I Corinthians 6:

I Corinthians 6:19-20 Or do you not know that your body is the temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and you are not your own? For you were bought at a price; therefore glorify God in your body and in your spirit, which are God's.

And Paul also says in Romans 12:1:

Romans 12:1 I beseech you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, that you present your bodies a living sacrifice [another way to say it is to perform faith with works], holy, acceptable to God, which is your reasonable service.

Here is what God challenges the people to do in Malachi 3:10-12. His directive has four parts.

First, God calls for obedience. All spiritual relationships with God start with obedience. "Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house." (Verse 10)

Second, God issues a challenge. "Try Me now in this," or "Test me in this." (Verse 10)

Third, God accompanies His call and challenge with a promise: "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. 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." (Verses 10-11) Those are divine blessings and protections he is talking about there.

Fourth, God speaks of the ultimate national result: "And all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a delightful land." (Verse 12)

God's challenge in this passage from Malachi is identical to one in Haggai, recorded by him approximately seventy-five years before.

In Haggai's day, the people had been neglecting the rebuilding of the Temple, which was God's announced will for them at that period. As a result, God had withheld rain and had not prospered the crops.

Much of the first portion of Haggai deals with this situation and challenges the people to take note of it and acknowledge God as the cause, and repent. We will read Haggai 2:15 and then verses 17-19.

Haggai 2:15 'And now, carefully consider from this day forward: from before stone was laid upon stone in the temple of the Lord.'

Let me insert here that the curse against the Israelites in verse 17, was God striking their jobs which relates to their not tithing, because for God's people, wealth and tithing are linked.

Haggai 2:17-19 'I struck you with blight and mildew and hail in all the labors of your hands; yet you did not turn to Me,' says the Lord. 'Consider now from this day forward, from the twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, from the day that the foundation of the

Lord's temple was laid—consider it [This is the third time He says “consider it” so that must be of great importance.]: Is the seed still in the barn? As yet the vine, the fig tree, the pomegranate, and the olive tree have not yielded fruit. But from this day I will bless you.”

God's blessing removes all curses. Before they obeyed God, the people experienced a curse of frustration and physical famine, in Haggai's day and in Malachi's day. But from that point on they were offered the blessed experience of satisfaction and material blessings, if they obeyed God.

Why not put God first, in the use of your financial resources and your time, and above all in what you do with yourself, and see if He will not “throw open the floodgates of heaven” and pour out such blessings that you will not have room enough for it. Keep in mind though that these blessings are quite often spiritual rather than material, but sometimes they are both.