

## Giving God His Due

Malachi 3:6-12

Sometimes, it's hard to apply the Old Testament to our current situation, isn't it? "You have robbed God," says Malachi. Can he be talking to us? "You have robbed God in your tithes and offerings." Surely he can't mean us generous Port Gibson Presbyterians, who are exemplary even among Mississippians, who are always ranked at or near the top among Americans for our generosity.

But Malachi does use that word tithe. No matter how you try to slice and dice the Hebrew, the word stubbornly refers to a tenth – a tenth of your livestock, of your crops, of your income. We Port Gibson Presbyterians may be generous, but do we tithe? Should we tithe? In fact, didn't Jesus say we didn't need to tithe?

Now, it is true that at the time of Christ, the Pharisees had taken tithing to legalistic extremes. And yes, Jesus had some harsh words to say about their attitude:

"Woe unto you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for ye pay tithe of mint and anise and cumin," the tiniest of seeds and spices, "and have omitted the weightier *matters* of the law, judgment, mercy, and faith."

Surely that means that Jesus wants us to leave behind all that legalistic hair-splitting and focus on the big picture. Surely, we just need to love God and love other people, right? After all, we Reformed Presbyterians know that we are saved by God's grace alone through faith alone in Christ alone. We know we can't earn our salvation by works.

But that doesn't mean that, after we are saved by grace, we are excused from following God's law. In fact, Jesus goes on to make this same point in His speech to the Pharisees: "These" – that is the big things like pursuing justice, mercy and faith, "ought ye to have done, and not to leave the other" – that is tithing – "undone."

In other words, far from reducing the requirements of the Law of God, Jesus raises the bar. And so, in our Christian gratitude for our salvation and in our pursuit of the big things like love for God and love for others, Jesus doesn't want us to neglect details like tithing. Instead we must add to them. We must pay attention to the details of the law, and apply the ones that still have meaning for us, all the while seeking to have a truer understanding of what all the Law of God means.

In fact, that's what Jesus did with all of the Old Testament Law – He expanded not only our understanding of it, but our responsibility to keep it. For example, this is what Jesus said about the sixth commandment:

"Ye have heard that it was said by them of old time, Thou shalt not kill; and whosoever shall kill shall be in danger of the judgment: But I say unto you, That whosoever is angry with his brother without a cause shall be in danger of the judgment."

In other words, according to Jesus, it's not enough simply to avoid committing murder – if you truly love your neighbor as yourself, you shouldn't even want to. Far from eliminating the law, He thus opens its meaning up further. He includes the inner spiritual reality along with the outward observance.

What does all this mean? Simply this: Jesus' teaching about all the Law of God reminds us that we must not only pay attention to the amount we give. We must also pay attention to the way that we give it. And in our responsive reading this morning, Paul agrees, making it plain that each one should give "as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver." In other words, if Old Testament people gave because they had to, Christians should give because we want to.

And why should we give in such a willing way? Because God deserves our best. Because God deserves the first fruits of our labors, not our leftovers. Because God deserves our love and devotion, not just our afterthoughts. That's why the discipline of tithing still has power for Christians today, because it is a great way of demonstrating our love for God. Tithing is a great way to show God that we put Him first.

And tithing is also an acknowledgment of God's sovereignty. It's an admission that God's power reaches into every corner of our lives. It's a way of saying that God is not just the sovereign over our spiritual condition, but over our physical condition as well. In short, when we tithe, we are saying that God is the God of our money.

Of course, we can continue to discount our need to tithe. We can believe that Jesus came to internalize or spiritualize all the requirements of the law. We can deny that we have an obligation to follow God's moral law in the physical realm.

But we wouldn't say that Jesus has completely transferred the blessings of God into the spiritual realm, would we? Yes, because of His life, death and resurrection we have, first and foremost, eternal life. We also have the fruit of the Spirit – love, joy and peace. As Paul says in our responsive reading, God makes grace abound toward all those who trust in Christ.

But just because Jesus gives us spiritual things doesn't mean He neglects our physical needs. No, Jesus taught us to pray, "Give us this day our daily bread." And that's because God's blessings are physical as well as spiritual. And God's promised blessings are tied to our faithfulness in tithing, at least according to today's passage from Malachi.

So, what does God promise us? God says that He will open the windows of heaven and pour out blessings on us. We might thus imagine something like a ticker-tape parade, with God's blessings floating down gently upon us from above.

But I think the reality is more radical than that. For back in Genesis chapter seven, the Bible says that the windows of heaven were opened and it rained upon the earth forty days and forty nights. In other words, during that great flood, God didn't just shower rain on the earth – he dumped it.

And this is what Malachi is trying to tell us: God doesn't promise to sprinkle a blessing on us every now and then. He promises to dump blessings on those who put Him first. God says that generous givers will be so blessed that you won't have any place to put all the things God will provide for you.

And He promises to give us whatever we need. In Malachi's day, the people were farmers, so God promised to keep disease from destroying their crops. He promised to let the fruit of their vines come to maturity.

How might we translate those ideas into today's terms? If God were speaking today, would He promise us jobs? Would He promise to pay our bills?

Now, I'm not trying to turn into some prosperity-gospel preacher, saying, "Send in your donation, and God will give you a new Cadillac." We know that's not right. We all remember times that we haven't gotten everything we have prayed for. We all know times when, even after intense prayer, people lost jobs or their families or their health.

But in avoiding the error of the prosperity gospel, could we Presbyterians have gone too far in the other direction? Have we settled only for spiritual blessings from God? And could that be the reason we have neglected the spiritual discipline of tithing? After all, we look at the car note, the house note, the kids' tuition – those things don't change from month to month. And the price of everything is going up, even while our retirement income and paychecks stay the same. No, we just don't see how we can afford to give a tenth to God and His work.

But then the crunch comes. Loved ones are sick. A job is lost. Unexpected medical bills come in. Another baby is on the way. A breadwinner dies. The budget is busted. It's in those times that our sophistication is lost and we are driven to our knees.

And in those times of crisis, we Presbyterians do pray for real physical blessings, don't we? We do pray for the sick. We do pray for jobs when we or our loved ones are out of work. And we trust that God will be faithful, not just in the spiritual realm, but also in the physical. We pray for our daily bread. And we trust God to provide it for us and for our loved ones.

And in our responsive reading, Paul affirms that it's not only Old Testament believers who can trust God in this way. In verse 10, Paul says it is God that supplies seed to the sower. It is God Who thus gives us the

opportunity for profitable work. Paul says it is God that provides bread for food, allowing us to benefit from our labor and the labor of others. Paul promises that those who sow bountifully will also reap bountifully.

And during this Thanksgiving season, can we Americans doubt that God has indeed blessed us so abundantly? To every one of us, God has granted another day of life. To every one of us, God has granted the gift of worship. To every one of us God has granted the opportunity to study His Word. And of course He has blessed us in so many material ways too.

No, it's no wonder that people all over the world call us blessed, just as Malachi says in verse 12. Truly God has given us a delightful land. Truly, we have a God Who answers prayer. Truly, we have a God Who has dumped all kinds of blessings on us.

But knowing that it is God Who has blessed us so richly, our focus should not remain solely on ourselves. After all, in our responsive reading, Paul is confident that God has blessed the Corinthians, and has multiplied the gifts that they have so generously given to the poor, not only so that the Corinthians might have more, but so that they might give even more in the future.

And what effects did their gifts have? Of course the needs of poor Christians in Jerusalem were met. But the Corinthians' gifts also gave those Jerusalem Christians a reason to give thanks to God. The Jerusalem Christians who received the gift from the Corinthians then turned around and gave glory to the God Who is the source of all good gifts. The Corinthians' gifts thus had a multiplying effect, magnifying God's praise.

Moreover, by giving generously, the Corinthian Christians bore witness to the gospel of Christ by living it out, by displaying selfless love to those in need. So it's no wonder that Paul calls their gift the fruits of their righteousness. Giving generously always brings glory to God in many ways.

But in their giving, the Corinthians also received great blessings themselves, blessings that flowed out of the relationships their gifts established. After all, in verse 14 Paul points out that the Jerusalem Christians were praying for the Corinthians, longing to see them because they experienced the grace of God through their gifts. The Corinthians' gifts thus not only turned out to be a multiplier of praise to God and of thanksgiving offered to God. Their gifts also turned out to be a multiplier of love. The blessings that were used to bless others brought more blessings back to themselves.

But of course there is an even greater gift, the greatest gift of all, the one which Paul says in verse 15 is indescribable. It's the reason that Paul says God is able to make all grace abound toward believers. It's the precious gift of God's own Son, Jesus Christ. It's the gift that Jesus has given to everyone who trusts in Him. For Jesus gave us all He is and all He has. He gave up His very life so that we might have life, and so that we might share that life eternally with Him and with everyone who trusts in Him.

In light of such a precious, indescribable gift, and in the light of such tremendous spiritual blessings that flow out of the gifts we give to one another, well, tithing starts to look more like a floor than a ceiling, doesn't it? After all, God's Old Testament people only saw God's grace through the object lessons of animal sacrifices, and they responded by giving a tenth of their income to further the work of God. So should we Christians, we who have seen how great a gift God has given us, we who know how great a price God has paid for our salvation – should we give any less?

Yes, the way that God explains His grace to His people may have shifted since the Old Testament days. We no longer look forward to the cross through animal sacrifices, but instead look back to the cross in gratitude and wonder. But the cross of Christ proves that the grace of our God has never really changed. The cross proves that the promises of God are always fulfilled.

And we find in Malachi that this faithful, never-changing God challenges us to put Him to the test. Give God a tenth, He says, and let Him worry about where it will come from. So let us trust God with our substance, not just with our salvation. Let us trust the Lord of Hosts and give Him His due. And then let us wait with confident

anticipation. For if the Lord of Hosts insists that He is determined to dump His blessings on us, we can be sure that He will keep His promise, and keep it abundantly.