

**July 1, 2018 Hilary Smith**

**Introduction:**

I began a sermon series on Malachi last year and now we're on the 5<sup>th</sup> installment. I just want to give a brief recap again on what's happening. The people of Israel were sent into exile for apostasy. For rejecting the Lord their God. They spent years in exile and that was really hard for them as a nation. So when they came back, they worshipped the Lord their God with zealousness. They worshipped because so many good things were happening! It was a miracle from God that they returned.

The second temple was being built. Sacrifices were offered once again. Their covenant with God was reconfirmed. Then the people grew complacent. And we can see all the things that they were doing wrong in the book of Malachi. Malachi has this series of reprimands as the Lord, through Malachi, is lovingly correcting his people and bringing them back to him. Let's see what the Lord has to say to us in our passage this morning.

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Let's look at verses 6 and 7. The Lord never changes. God is always the same. The Lord through Malachi reminds his people about this by bringing up the past. The God that their ancestor Jacob served is their God too. The exact same God.

And in one sense the people haven't changed either. Even from the time of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, from the past to the present, the people were still sinners. God though Malachi, basically says, "the only reason why you are all alive right now is because of me. Because I do not change. I still love you. I am faithful to my promises."

Last week Rich preached on Genesis 12 when God called out Abraham. He promised Abraham that He would be His God and his children's God. And the whole earth would be blessed through the family of Abraham and his numerous descendants. Despite all that has gone on from the first book of the Old Testament to the last book of the Old Testament, God is still the same. God is faithful to his promises.

Because of God's faithfulness, and because his people keep turning away from him, he continuously calls his people to return to Him. The Lord Almighty says, 'return to me, and I will return to you.' The word for "return" in Hebrew is shuv. It's a very common word in the Old Testament and it can mean many things. The same as in English.

We go somewhere and return back to our homes. When we buy flights we either choose a 1-way or we choose a return flight. We return to the destination where we belong. Or someone can lend us things and then we return them. Right now we are advertising some items that we need to decorate for VBS. And at the bottom of the post it says, "everything will be labeled and returned to you." We always want to return important things to their rightful owner.

In the word shuv, here is this implicit understanding that there is something very important about our starting place and about rightful ownership. So when God says, "return to me" he is saying, "You belong here. You are mine."

This is a constant theme of the Old Testament. God is faithful, but his people are not. His people stray and the Lord calls them back. His people stray and the Lord calls them back. It doesn't

matter what they have done, the Lord will take them back **every single time.**

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And if his people do not return to him, he will get their attention. And often times, God will send his people trials to revive them.

And the people ask God in verse 7, "how do we return?" or as other translations say, "why do we have to return?" And God, through Malachi, responds rather surprisingly.

Let's look at verses 8-11. He responds with a question of his own. Will man rob God? The way this is worded in Hebrew is a resounding NO! A human being cannot rob God. He's God! But then in sharp contrast right after, the Hebrew wording says that they are continually rob God. And we would ask with the people in the next verse. "How? How do we rob you? How is that even possible?"

And it says in verse 8 that the people are continuously robbing God in their tithes and offerings. The word tithe literally means a tenth part. Did you know that there are 3 kinds of tithes? The first one is the one that we're probably the most familiar with. Giving away 10% of one's income or food that was designated to the Levites. Because the Levites worked full time at the temple, their livelihood came from the people's tithe.

The second tithe was income that was set aside for themselves for once a year for when they would make their trips to Jerusalem to go to the temple for worship. Sort of like a vacation that was geared toward growing in God. Then the third tithe was for the poor and that was at the end of every 3 years. Besides a tithe, we also have offerings. An offering is meant as giving for special holy purposes. It was often used for maintenance of the temple and for the priests.

We can understand from our text that the people were not giving enough tithes or offerings to support the temple staff and temple maintenance, so the Levites had to find other work so they could eat and the temple itself was not being taken care of. In addition, the people were called in Genesis 12 for a mission! They were to be a blessing! So, due to lack of funds, no ministry was happening in the temple because there was not enough to help anyone who was in need or pay for anyone to be there.

This is a big deal! The Lord takes this really seriously! Because every single time that one of his people was hurting, no one was there to help. The temple represents the presence of God. They were the hands and feet of God. Whatever happened in the temple happened because of God so a sin against the temple was a sin against God.

No one in the entire nation is giving. It's so serious that the Lord has placed a great curse upon them. And we find out what this curse is in verse 11. It is the failure of crops. God affected their economic situation. God disrupted them to get their attention. Because they didn't tithe, they didn't make as much as they used to. They didn't realize this as being connected to their tithing, but just used it as an excuse to not give. They are

learning now that tithing wasn't an option. They can't give whenever they see fit or when it's convenient for them. It was a command from the Lord.

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He tells His people to bring the entire tithe so that there would be food again in the temple. And In verse 10, the Lord invites his people to test him. Testing is actually fairly normal in the Old Testament. But usually the one doing the testing is God himself. But there are a few instances where God allows his people to test him to show them that his promises are real, like with Gideon and with Moses.

This kind of testing is always initiated by God. The wrong kind of test is when humans approach God in their arrogance and challenge him, like we see a little farther along in chapter three in verse 15. In verse 10, God is initiating the test. In the Hebrew, we might also be able to translate this as the Lord saying, "Please, test me. Please, take a risk with me."

And God is looking forward to his people responding. He is anticipating it. He is ready for it. He is looking forward to it. It's like he can't wait for his people to return to Him again and he communicates to his people the promised blessing. He is ready to throw open the floodgates and pour out so many blessings for his children that they will not have room for all of it.

And the curse? Check out verse 11. The Lord is going to destroy it. The locusts that eat all the crops will be cast away and the vines will produce an abundance of grapes. According to the covenant with Abraham, God will be their God and they have to obey him. When they obey him they are promised a blessing. And when they disobey, they are cursed.

And so, once again, when Israel returns back to God, according to verse 12, they will once again be a blessed nation. They will fulfill their mandate of being a missional people. All the surrounding nations will look in at Israel and see that the Lord is with obviously with them.

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And God is still with us. And he is still the same. The Lord, through his word, reminds us by looking at the past. The God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the God that was speaking to the people though Malachi is the exact same God as we are worshipping here this morning. The Lord never changes.

And we haven't changed either. We are still sinners alive only by the grace of God. He still loves his children. He is still faithful to his promises.

In Genesis 12, we read about God's plan to bring redemption and restoration to the world. He calls Abraham and him and his descendants would be a blessing to the nations. They are a nation that people look at and see that the Lord is real among them. In the New Testament, the new covenant, God expands his family to include all the nations. We move from a "come and see" to a "go and tell" missional family. We are the church. Mission is in our DNA. And God is still faithful to his promise to be our God and to use us to make the name of the Lord great among the nations.

A lot of the time we are faithful to our Lord and we "go and tell" and are a blessing. And a lot of the time we also "go and sin" as it were. But the Lord is faithful and continuously calls us back to him. And if we do not return, he will get our attention.

I remember reading a story once from a kid's perspective. He and his friend would often go to a convenience store and his friend would steal things. His friend would take little candies or chocolate bars and stuff them in his pocket. And he always got away with it. His friend dared him to do it. He wanted to be cool so he tried it too and he quickly stuffed some gum in his pocket. But someone who worked there saw him. And he was caught shoplifting. The police and his parents were called and he got in trouble. And as a kid all he could think about was how unfair it was that he was caught. His friend did it so many times but he walked away unscathed. He did it one time and he got in a ton of trouble. And he asked...why did God love his friend so much and not him?

The point of the story was to illustrate that it actually was the opposite. It was a great act of love for this kid to get caught from stealing. God got his attention, disciplined him, changed his mind about stealing, and set him on the right path. God will often disrupt his people so they return back to him. And as we see in our text, we stray when we rob God.

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So, how do we rob God? What does tithing look like now? The simple answer is that Jesus came to fulfill the law. We read this in Matthew 5 in the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus says, "I did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it."

This does not mean that we are lax with the law though now. Right after Jesus says this, he introduces the new Spirit led paradigm. He says things like, "you have heard that it was said, 'do not murder, but I tell you if you're angry you're subject to judgment.'" And "you have heard that it was said, 'do not commit adultery, but I tell you do not lust.'" And "you have heard that it was said, "do not break your oath, but I tell you do not swear at all." Etc. Etc. Etc. If anything, our way of living intensifies.

Maybe we could also say, "you have heard that it was said, "give 10% of your possessions, but I tell you that everything you own belongs to me. And I expect you to return what I give you for my glory."

The money that is given to the church is used for similar things that the temple used it for in the time of Malachi. I double check yesterday and I'm happy to report that I'm still receiving a salary. I'm assuming the rest of the people on staff are too. The lights are on so I assume our bills have been paid. I'm told we bought a couple new projectors, which was taken care of by our Committee of Administration who is so faithful in our church maintenance.

We have a strong deaconate in our church who is faithful at meeting the needs of people in our congregation and in our community. As a staff at this church I get to see many people who work behind the scenes to bless people in their time of need. In the past 2 weeks we've had 2 funerals and we've had many of the same people in our church volunteer their time to serve food and care for the grieving family.

Our church partners with other churches in a lot of our ministries. We participate in ministry shares with our denomination and I believe we made our quota last year – meaning we gave our fair share to support our denominational ministries. We also work with local churches to do a ministry that is near and dear to every church's heart – helping the needy. Today our offering is for Mosaic Centre, a ministry that began with three churches, including ours, who saw a need and desired to meet it.

So, how are we doing as a church? We seem to be doing fairly well in that our staff is getting paid, our building is maintained, our deacons can respond to the needs in our congregation, and we are able to do ministries like helping the poor. When people are hurting, we have many people here to help.

So, it would seem that many people in our church are generous and trusting in our faithful God. Are we all doing it? I don't know. But I do know from our text that God takes our giving very seriously. We are a people that continually stray away from God and one of the ways that we do this is when we neglect the ministry of the church that we are part of. Repentance, like returning, is not just being sorry, but also an action. God cares so much that you return to him that one of the ways he chooses to do it is challenging us financially.

In C.S. Lewis's book, *Mere Christianity*, he writes this, "For many of us the great obstacle to charity lies not in our luxurious living or desire for more money, but in our fear – fear of insecurity."

I think he's right. Believing that we own all of our money can enslave us. We become fearful when we think we won't have enough. We can live in constant anxiety. Giving away money is an act of faith, because it takes away that security. We have to ask ourselves the question...do we have more faith in God or in our bank account?

It's not the way that typical Canadians think about money. It's not the normal cultural way of living.

### **Page 6 - Grace in the world**

But our way of living is not the only thing that intensifies. So does God's faithfulness. The physical temple that represented the presence of God was completely changed. Jesus Christ, the true temple came down to earth and was actually physically present among us. Then on the cross he changed the function of the temple. No longer did people have to make trip to Jerusalem to the temple to speak to the Lord and make retribution.

The true temple was torn down and was raised again 3 days later. And all of those united to Christ became living stones. We, his church became a people and we are all being made holy and we represent his presence everywhere we go. We are the hands and feet of Christ. We are still sinners, but God continually calls us back to him. It doesn't matter what we have done, Jesus takes us back **every single time**.

The Lord's faithfulness intensifies. He came down to seek us to call us back to himself. He emptied himself and gave up everything he had so we could return to him. He bought us, not with money, but with his life. We belong to him and we are his.

He's saying, "Please test me! Please, take a risk with me! I want to show you my intense faithfulness. I want to show you that I am the God from the bible you say you believe in. I am the God that parted the waters of the Red Sea, it was me who rained down manna in the desert. I made a donkey talk, I caused the sun and moon to stand still, I stopped lions from eating Daniel in the den, I am that same God. I have not changed. I can provide for you. I am ready for you to return. My arms are wide open. I will flood you with my love and pour out my Holy Spirit. It doesn't matter what you have done I will take you back **every single time**. You belong here. You belong with me. You are mine.

God's faithfulness intensifies. God took an extreme measure to bring us back to himself. He disrupted himself. We were slaves to the idea that we own everything and we were slaves to the thought that we can provide for ourselves and don't need the Lord. Then the Lord, on the cross, paid our bounty. He emptied himself. He became a curse for us. Now, we are free to be a blessing. We are no longer a slave to fear of security.

God's faithfulness and our way of living intensifies together.

Can you feel his love? Have you strayed from the Lord? Hear him calling to you. Hear his loving voice. Trust in his everlasting faithfulness. God is looking forward to your response. He is anticipating your return and is ready to bless you with his presence and give you his grace. Our God is generous to us. And because we were made in his image, we are to be generous too.

When C.S. Lewis writes about how much to give, he says, "I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare. In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc, is up to the standard common among those with the same income as our own, we are probably giving away too little. If our charities do not at all pinch or hamper us, I should say they are too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them."

C.S. Lewis doesn't just say it; he lived it. The great selling author and apologist pretty much went broke because he gave so much away. We are the church. We don't just say that we trust in God's everlasting faithfulness, but we live it. And we show our neighbors and the world where our hope is and are ready to tell them about our faithful and unchanging God so they too can return to where they belong. Amen.