

## OKOTOKS EVANGELICAL FREE CHURCH

THE BEST QUESTION EVER: COULD VS. SHOULD

APRIL 26-MAY 2, 2015



### MAIN POINT

Giving is an act of worshipful stewardship; if we truly love God we will give Him our first fruits, not our leftovers.

### THINKING THINGS THROUGH

Connect the sermon to the study.

1. If you unexpectedly received \$50,000 tonight, what do you think you would do with the money? How much do you think you would save? Spend? Would you give any away? Why or why not?
2. What is the first thing you usually do on payday? Has that always been the first thing? How have your payday spending habits changed over the years?

**Leader:** If you want to know what is truly important to a person, just follow the money. Many times our expenditures are more honest than our words when it comes to what we really love and value. Scripture teaches us that if we truly love God, then the way we use our money will reflect that love. Judging by the way that people in the U.S. and Canada use their money, it would seem that God is not high on their priorities. According to a recent Relevant Magazine article, tithers make up only 10-25 percent of a normal congregation and the average tither gives about 2.4% of their income.<sup>1</sup> This is problematic because, according to Scripture, giving is an act of worship. When our first priority with our money is to spend it on ourselves, we worship ourselves. In Malachi, God rebukes His people because their giving reflected poorly on their hearts—they were not giving their best to God. Through Malachi, we will see that if we truly love God, we will give Him our first fruits, not our leftovers.

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1 <http://www.relevantmagazine.com/god/church/what-would-happen-if-church-tithed#UIQv9VsLV0Wo4X1e.99>

### DIGGING DEEPER

Unpack the biblical text to discover what the Scripture says or means about a particular topic.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MALACHI 1:6-14.

**Leader:** God spoke to the nation of Israel through the prophet Malachi about 100 years after the Israelites had been permitted by Cyrus to return to Israel and rebuild Jerusalem and the temple after a long period of exile under the Babylonians and Persians. It was a difficult time of transition for Israel as the nation faced numerous trials: they were threatened by surrounding nations, endured a prolonged drought, and suffered from pestilence (Mal. 3:10ff). During this difficult time, however, the Lord spoke to the people to let them know that their economic hardships did not excuse their half-hearted worship.

3. How were the priests and subsequently the people of Israel showing “contempt” for God’s name? What did their actions reveal about their priorities?

**4. What do our culture's financial priorities look like? How are our actions similar to the priests in verses 7-9 and 12-14 when we adopt our culture's financial priorities?**

**Leader:** God asserted that the priests' worship of Him was devoid of honor, honor like that which a son was expected to give "his father" and a servant "his master" (v. 6). Their assignment was to lift up the name of God, to serve Him before the people. Sadly, their practice suggested they despised His name instead. In Hebrew thought, the name and the person who bore it were inseparably connected. To dishonor the name of the Lord was to dishonor the Lord Himself. The questions the priests raised in verses 6-7 were in essence a denial of the charges. In response, God pointed out that their casual attitude toward worship, especially in offering sacrifices, was proof that they weren't showing the respect and honor He was due. The offering of blind, lame, or sick animals was open defiance of the law (see Deuteronomy 15:21; Leviticus 22:18-19). Such offerings "profaned" God's name. To "profane" (v. 12) means to treat a person as insignificant or worthless. It also conveys the idea of bringing dishonor to someone by associating his or her name with something shameful. To profane the name of God is to profane all that He is. The priests and the people profaned God's name by their attitudes toward Him, their weariness with serving Him, and the tainted worship they gave Him (vv. 12-13). Such a people couldn't expect to be blessed.

**5. What we give to God is a reflection of what we think about Him. What do we communicate when we only give to God what is left over after we have spent for ourselves?**

**6. How is our spending (and giving) a reflection of our spiritual health?**

**Leader:** Israel failed to recognize God's love for them and failed to offer Him their best in worship because they didn't recognize His greatness. He was no regional deity; He wasn't limited in His ability, and He wasn't prone to act one way and then another. The day would come when not only Israel would realize this, but also His name would be "great among the nations, from the rising of the sun to its setting" (v. 11). In other words, all nations from one end of the earth to the other will someday recognize God and bow before Him.

> HAVE A VOLUNTEER READ MALACHI 3:6-12.

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**Leader:** In verses 6-7, despite Israel's half-hearted worship, God calls the nation to repent and promises that if they return to Him that He will return to them. One of the premier evidences that the people of Israel's hearts were not right before God is found in verse 8, where God says of Israel, "You are robbing me." The "tithe" mentioned in verse 8 literally means "payment of the tenth" and represents the biblical standard for giving back to God a portion of what He has given us. The act of tithing pre-dated the Christian church and was practiced as early as the Book of Genesis (see Gen. 14:18-20; 28:22), and it remains part of church practice today. (See Matthew 23:23 for Jesus' additional instruction about tithing.) The "contributions" referred to other offerings that supported the Levites, the priests, and the poor.

**7. Why did God point out failure to practice the discipline of tithing as evidence that His people had turned away from and "robbed" Him?**

**8. When we tithe, what does giving the first ten percent of our income communicate about our perception of our finances? Why is it important that we see ourselves as stewards of our money and not owners of it?**

**Leader:** The practice of tithing demonstrates several important aspects of God's people's relationship with Him. (1) It is an act of obedience, an expression of devotion to the Lord. (2) It acknowledges that God owns everything; we are merely stewards of what He has entrusted to us. (3) It expresses faith in God as Provider, trusting Him to enable us to meet our needs with what remains. The Lord did not command tithing to harm or hinder His people. He loves us and always wants the best for us. To fail to tithe is to miss His blessing of the joy of giving. He may use varied means to discipline us and teach us the importance of acknowledging through tithing that He owns all we have.

**9. What does it mean to "bring the whole tithe"? What does this tell us about the motives with which God wants us to give? What does God promise to those who give this way (v. 10)?**

**Leader:** As the leader of your group, be aware that this study might be the first time some of your group members have been challenged to give. Don't let your group members get hung up on how they give but instead challenge them to recognize that their money belongs to God. Challenge them to make deliberate plans to give regularly and generously of what God has graciously given them for His kingdom purposes.

Our giving is a measure of our obedience to God, faith in God, and love for God. Jesus gave His all for us, and He asks us to give all we have and are to Him. The purpose of giving is twofold. Tithing does not guarantee us financial blessing from the Lord but it does guarantee us spiritual blessing (v. 11). Our giving not only provides support for OEFC's mission and ministries but also deepens our relationships with God.

**10. Do you really believe God's promise in verse 10? Have you ever truly tried to trust this promise in the way that you give? What might that look like?**

### DOING LIFE TOGETHER

Help your group identify how the truths from the Scripture passage apply directly to their lives.

**11. How might your financial priorities need to change to ensure that you are worshiping God wholeheartedly rather than with your leftovers?**

**12. We live in a culture that presents us daily with messages that tempt us to use our money selfishly. How could you grow to be more discerning of these messages?**

**Leader:** Stress to your group that financial stewardship is not a secondary issue but relates directly to our relationship with God. For that reason, it is important that we not gloss over this lesson and its implications. Encourage your group members to take time this week to discuss their giving with their spouses and/or close friends in the group. Challenge them to pray as well, asking God to help them see giving not as a burden but as a joyful opportunity to express their love for and gratitude to God.

**13. How might we help one another be more disciplined with our finances and use the money we've been given to worship the Lord?**

### PRAYER

Thank God for the privilege of worshipping Him through giving. Thank God for His promise to bless us when we are joyfully generous. Pray that our tithing would produce generosity in our hearts toward our brothers and sisters in Christ and toward the lost in our community.

### FOLLOW UP

Midway through this week, send a follow-up email to your group with some or all of the following:

- ☐ Questions to consider as they continue to reflect on what they learned this week:
  - **How has God blessed you for your faithfulness in giving to Him? How will your giving change this week?**
  - **Have you made time to discuss your attitude toward giving and stewardship with your spouse or a close friend from our church?**
- ☐ A note of encouragement, following up on any specific prayer requests mentioned during your group gathering and the challenge to memorize Malachi 3:10.

### SPOTLIGHT ON THE PASSAGE

#### MALACHI 1:6-14

1:6-10. Malachi saw neglect and disobedience in Israel. Israel needed rebuke. Malachi began with two clearly evident facts. The first fact: a son honors his father (Deut. 14:1). The second fact: a servant honors his master (Lev. 25:55). Everybody in Israel could have agreed that sons and servants should honor fathers and masters and that Israel was a son and servant of the Lord. If anyone should have honored and feared the Lord, the priests should have. Instead, the Lord charged that the priests “despise My name.” In Hebrew thought, the name and the person who bore it were inseparably connected. To dishonor the name of the Lord was to dishonor the Lord Himself. Israel’s priests did not honor God rightly, but still they asked, “How have we despised Your name?” They were going through all the motions. They showed up to serve at the temple, kept the lamps lit, tended the altar fires, repeated the prayers, and made the sacrifices. The Lord quickly replied that they despised Him “by presenting defiled food on My altar.” If offerings were defiled, they were unclean, impure, or imperfect. The priests offered blind, lame, or sick animals in sacrifice. The law strictly forbade sacrificing to the Lord lame and blind animals or animals with any defect (Deut. 15:21). Giving an imperfect animal dishonored rather than honored the recipient. The priests knew quite well not to give such an animal as a tax payment or gift to their governor. Was not the Lord of Hosts due even more honor than a man? Yet Israel’s priests offered God second or third best (vv. 7-9). The Lord sharply responded that He would rather one of the priests “shut the temple doors” than to continue to “kindle a useless fire on My altar!” (v. 10). No worship at all would have been better than false worship that dishonored God. As long as second rate worship continued, the Lord would accept no offering from their hands. The worst choice available to Israel was to continue in their neglect and disobedience. A better choice would have been to discontinue worship altogether. The best choice of all was repentance and right worship (see Malachi 3:16-18).

1:11-14. These verses are similar to verses 6-10, but contrast the poor worship of God’s people with the pure worship Gentiles would one day offer Him. Not only is God greater than an earthly father, master, or governor, He is and will be great among the nations. The God of Israel is “the God of all the earth” (Isaiah 54:5). Malachi’s message linked his own period of history with God’s future fulfillment of His promise to bless all nations or peoples through Abraham’s and Jacob’s descendents (Genesis 12:3; 28:14). Isaiah likewise had prophesied that Gentile nations would know and make offerings to the Lord in their own countries (Isaiah 19:19-25; 66:18-21). Through the redemptive work of Christ on the cross and by His wisdom and power, God will have people “from every tribe and language and people and nation” in His kingdom serving Him as priests (Revelation 5:9). In a spectacular display of wisdom and power, our great God will complete in the return and reign of Jesus Christ what He promised to do in ages past.

**MALACHI 3:6-12**

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3:6. This verse contains a sobering message. The LORD spoke through His prophet to tell the Israelites that they deserved total destruction. The word translated perished has the root meaning of end. "Why had the end not come for them? Not because the Israelites had done anything to deserve God's mercy. On the contrary, they deserved to be destroyed for their failure to love and follow the Lord. They had been spared because they were the descendants of Jacob, and God had promised to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob to bless all nations through their descendants. The Lord does not change. Because God may always be relied on to keep His promises, the people had not perished. Instead, the Lord once more was offering the Israelites an opportunity to repent and to receive His blessings.

3:7. The Lord consistently had been faithful to the people through whom He had chosen to send His Messiah into the world. Nevertheless they habitually had turned away from His statutes (laws) generation after generation—since the days of your fathers.

The Israelites knew the commandments of God, but they had not kept them. Is that not true of many of us? We have read and heard the Bible taught and preached quite a bit. We know what the Lord expects of us. The question each of us must answer is: Am I obeying or ignoring what God's Word has instructed me to do? God entreated the people to return to Him. If they would repent of their stubborn rebellion, He promised to return to them. The unchanging God of their fathers had not changed in His love for His people. They had turned away from Him. He invited them to come back to the receptive arms of the One Who loved them and would forgive them.

3:8. The Lord pointed to a particular way the people should return to Him. They needed to stop robbing Him. "In what way do we rob You?" Indeed, how can a human being rob God? Beware of taking lightly the Lord's answer. He declared the Israelites were robbing Him in the tenth. The tenth means "the first 10 percent of one's increase." "Every tenth of the land's produce, grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the LORD; it is holy to the LORD" (Lev. 27:30). After all, how could withholding the tithe be robbing God unless people were keeping for themselves that which belonged to God in the first place? They also robbed God in the contributions. That term indicates offerings aside from the tithe. These were some of the sacrifices mandated in the law and were given to the Lord as a part of the temple worship.

3:9. Withholding tithes and offerings was not isolated to a few individuals but was characteristic of the whole nation. The people as a whole were suffering under a curse. In their case, those effects evidently were drought, crop failures, and famine (3:10-11) as God's disciplinary punishment for their sins. The Lord did not command tithing to harm or hinder His people. He loves us and always wants the best for us. One major lesson He teaches us through the discipline of giving is that He is the Owner of all things. To fail to tithe is to miss His blessing of the joy of giving. He may use varied means to discipline us and to teach us the importance of acknowledging through tithing that He owns all we have.

3:10. The Lord instructed the people what to give, where to give, and why they should give. They were not merely to bring a nominal offering but to bring the whole tenth. Tithing is the biblical standard for believers' giving. While believers may fall short of biblical standards, the biblical standards remain. We violate God-given Scripture if we imply that giving less than what God requires is acceptable and pleasing to Him. Tithing is an act of obedience to God. Some people object to tithing because Malachi wrote in the Old Testament era. They say that they are excused from tithing because they are under grace, not the law. True, we are saved by grace through faith, not by keeping the law. However, Jesus died on the cross to save us from our self-centered sins, not to save us from tithing. He strongly upheld the law as the standard for how we should live (Matt. 5:17-20). Tithing is neither legalistic nor pre-gospel, pre-Christian, or sub-Christian. Rather, giving the whole tithe is a measure of a believer's obedience to the Lord, faith in the Lord, and love for the Lord. Jesus gave His all for us, and He asks us to give all we have and are to Him. He is Lord over the 90 percent as much as over the 10 percent. The Lord also instructed His people where they should bring their gifts to Him. They could not use their tithes in any way they chose and then claim to be obedient. They were to bring the tithe into the treasure house. This was the treasury of God's temple. Tithes were used to provide the needs of those responsible for maintaining and leading in worship of Almighty God. Some church members express dissatisfaction over

their church's use of funds and make that an excuse for not bringing their tithes to the Lord's house. Others claim to satisfy the requirement to tithe by giving their tithes to religious or benevolent causes outside the church. Individuals indeed should give over and above their tithes to good, godly causes as they are able. That does not substitute for giving their tithes to support the work of Christ through His church. The purpose of tithing is twofold. Giving through the local church provides for the work of the gospel ministry. Malachi wrote that the Lord viewed this as supplying food for His house. In the days of the temple, the priests and Levites were to receive their living from the meat and grain offerings that people sacrificed to the Lord, as well as from the money that was given. Today, the tithes and offerings of God's people provide support for the churches' ministers and its ministries. Another purpose of tithing is to bring the giver into a closer relationship with God. The LORD of Hosts, the faithful God of the covenant, invited the people of Malachi's day to prove Him in this matter of giving tithes. He wanted them to test His faithfulness. If they would tithe, He would provide abundantly for them. The nation of Israel was experiencing famine from drought and lost crops. God would open for them the windows of heaven and pour out blessing for them until...no more room for them could be found. This may mean all kinds of blessings, but Genesis 7:11 uses the same Hebrew term here translated the windows of heaven to describe rain. This probably was a promise of drought-breaking rain that would bring abundant crops. That understanding is supported by verse 11.

3:11. The Lord not only would ensure the growth of crops but also the harvest—I will rebuke the devourer for you, pests that would consume the crops before the harvest. In addition, the vine in the field will not be barren. No blight would ruin the harvest. The curse under which the people were living would be lifted and they would experience anew the blessings of God. Some people have assumed that this Scripture is a guarantee that everyone who tithes will be rewarded financially. That is an assumption that makes two serious errors. First, giving to get is investing, not giving. The notion of giving to get contradicts the very meaning and spirit of giving. We should give for the joy of giving to our gracious and loving Lord, not in hope of a material return on our investment. The second error is a failure to realize that the promised blessings may or may not be material in nature. Yes, verse 11 indicates that the Lord promised material blessings to the Israelites of Malachi's day. We all can affirm confidently that God meets the needs of His faithful children (Matt. 6:33). Nevertheless, financial prosperity may not be the kind of blessing each person most needs. Jesus owned virtually nothing (Matt. 8:20), told a rich ruler to sell all he had (Luke 18:22), and warned against greed and thinking material possessions are the main thing in life (Luke 12:15). We can trust our Heavenly Father's love and wisdom. As we are faithful to Him, He will provide for us exactly the blessing we need.

3:12. As God abundantly would meet the needs of the faithful Israelites, they would gain a reputation among all the nations as being fortunate. No longer would they be seen as a weak and pitiful remnant who had returned to huddle in their ruined and ravaged homeland. The entire world would see their nation as a delightful land. God's promised blessings were not only for His people's sake but also for the sake of other nations. He wants all peoples to know Him as the true Lord God Almighty. When we faithfully meet God's standard of giving by tithing our incomes to the church, we too experience God's blessing. We will learn by experience the joy of giving. Our faith will be strengthened, and lost people who observe our relationship with God may be drawn to Him as well.