

15 November 2020

On Robbing God Malachi 3:8-12

Our scripture today is from the book of the prophet Malachi, chapter 3, verses 8-12:

⁸Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. ¹¹I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. ¹²Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

I have heard many sermons preached from this text, but I have never preached one myself. That may be because I've just never gotten around to it, but I think it probably has to do with the fact that I find this passage abhorrent. It represents everything that I hate in a stewardship sermon. To start off with, there's the whole "robbing God" thing. Malachi accuses the people of Judea of robbing God. They ask "How do you rob God?" and he says, "By not tithing!" Not giving to the temple, apparently, does God an injury – and makes God angry enough to curse the. Second, the prophecy feels penny-pinching. The people need to bring the "full tithe" into the storehouse. Ten percent and not one percent less – and remember, God can do math. Remember when Jesus criticized the religious leaders of his time for painstakingly tithing every tenth leaf of their herb gardens while not bothering with more important things like justice? You ever wonder where those pious prigs got that pettifogging approach to tithing? Malachi, it seems. Third, Malachi, *hints* that if the people do tithe, then maybe God will bless their farms and drive away the locusts and bring them rain and make them prosperous. Hmm, it just might happen. (And notice that while the curse for not tithing is laid out bluntly, the blessing for paying up is only a possibility.) And finally, what will this tithe be used for? Malachi says, "So that there will be food in [God's] house." But wait, why does God want food? Who's going to eat it? Oh, right. The priests. God's angry, apparently, because the priests aren't getting paid enough. We don't actually know anything about this prophet Malachi – we aren't even sure that's his real name – but I know one thing. He was clergy.

All that's already cringe-worthy, but it's worse if you look just a little deeper. What sort of God does Malachi present here? If this passage were all we knew about Israel's God, what would we conclude? First, this God wants stuff from us, and if he doesn't get it – or even if he feels short-changed – he gets mad. Second, his punishments are more dependable than his blessings. You can trust him to curse you if you don't pay up, but you can only hope he'll bless you if you do. And third, he is entirely transactional in his relationship with humanity: we scratch God's back, and he (might) scratch ours. There is no hint of love or grace or genuine relationship in this passage. This transactional God is, in fact, the God of the prosperity gospel. Remember a couple of years ago when the preacher Crespo Dollar appealed to his congregation to give generously because God wanted him to upgrade his private Jetstream? That was this God. Or my favorite example, going back a few decades, does anyone remember when Oral Roberts was appealing to his television congregation for money for a new building at his university? The cash wasn't coming in fast enough, so he went on the air and said, "We need more donations fast;

we're at the point where God might call this preacher home." Seriously. It was, like, the world's weirdest hostage situation. "Write a check to the preacher if you ever want to see him again." You'll not be surprised to hear that this passage from Malachi is a favorite of such preachers; it fits their God perfectly.

What it doesn't fit is Jesus Christ, or in fact the rest of the Bible, which is why I've never preached it before. But then, a few weeks ago, in a conversation with my daughter Grace, she suggested a new and fruitful and, I think, more broadly biblical way to understand this concept of "robbing God." So I want to put Malachi aside for a bit and think about that.

Now you know what "robbing" someone means. It means taking without permission something that belongs to someone else. So for there to be any notion of robbery, there has to be some concept of personal property, right? Most, if not all, human societies have at least some concept of property, but it's worth pointing out that few societies are as obsessive about it as ours is. As many of you know, the line in the Declaration of Independence about "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness" originally read "life, liberty, and property." And, while that was changed, as a nation we have largely retained the assumption that happiness and property are the same thing. "The American Dream" is not a life of love and beauty; it's a house in the suburbs with a two-car garage. We are more fixated on property and ownership than nearly any other culture. When settlers of European descent began moving west, one of the things about us that so astounded the current inhabitants of that region was the way we claimed ownership of land. "How can people own land?" they asked. "We belong to the land, not the other way around." And that was nothing: can you imagine trying to explain to those first peoples that one person could own the land, and another person could own the "mineral rights" to that land? We claim private ownership of nearly everything. Remember when Apple sued Samsung because, they claimed, the Galaxy cell phone had *stolen* their patented design for the iPhone? They owned that design. Apple lost, because upon investigation it turned out that they did not actually invent the rectangle, but the very fact that they tried to argue that is an indication of how obsessed we are with owning things.

But when we look at the Bible as a whole, we find a different picture of property. First of all, from start to finish, we are told that everything that we have is a gift from God. Some things are simply given freely and equally to all: life, sunlight, the capacity to love each other, love of beauty, geometry, physics. Other things, though, are given unequally; some people have more than others, depending on accidents of birth. These include health, strength, opportunity, and, yes, wealth. All are gifts, but the Bible goes on to specify that the gifts of God are not given as perpetual possessions for us to sock away but as things entrusted into our care by God. The first man and woman were given a paradise to live in and were told to take care of it. moreover, in the Hebrew Bible, those unequal gifts, like wealth, are understood to be temporary. According to the law, every seven years, debts were to be cancelled so that people could start over, and every fifty years all land that had changed ownership in that half century was to be returned to its original owners. In the Mosaic law, wealth and property had a reset button. Clearly, it wasn't just that all things were given by God, but all things still belonged to God, and our "ownership" of anything was more like a lease, or a loan, or an investment that God made in us.

And what were people in the Bible to do with God's investment? Take care of each other. That's clear all through scripture. A few weeks ago, when I told the story of Ruth, I mentioned that Israel's law code was designed to give a boost to those on the margins. Farmers – and, to be

clear, that was pretty much everyone – were banned from reaping every inch of their fields in the harvest. They were supposed to leave the margins alone, so that people who had lost their land or whose crops had failed or who for some other reason were hungry could follow along behind and reap too. The same rule applied to olive trees. Yes, you may gather from the trees, but don't shake the branches to get every last olive off. Leave those for the poor. Notice the difference between that mindset and ours today. We would say, "That's the farmer's land, he can do what he wants with it. But in Israel, since the land was seen as still ultimately belonging to God and only given to the farmer in trust, God still got to lay down the rules for how the harvest was to be used. And God's rules said, "Make sure that no one is hungry."

So – and this is the insight that Grace offered me – in these biblical terms, robbing God isn't withholding money from God's church. Robbing God is not using God's gifts to us as God would have us use them. Robbing God is keeping everything that God has given us for ourselves. Robbing God is having more than we need and ignoring people who have nothing. This is so different from the way we usually think that it may take a bit to get your head around it, but if we begin with the biblical assumption that all we have is a gift of God, given us for a purpose, it makes perfect sense. Here: a modern example. Suppose I start my own Charity Foundation. Call it the Morris Foundation, because I'm modest like that. I get my 501(c)3 tax exempt status and start collecting donations, telling everyone that the funds will be used to feed large-eyed children and rescue puppies, but then I spend all that money on the Morris Foundation headquarters with the in-house bowling alley and water park for staff. Who have I robbed? Well, those children and puppies, for starters, but I've also robbed everyone who made a donation to me for a different purpose. My suggestion today is that we need to start thinking about everything we have not as "my personal property, and it's no one's business what I do with it" but rather as God's investment in our lives, for the purpose of caring for others. If we misappropriate God's gifts to us by using them for another purpose, then – yeah – in a sense, that's robbing God.

Having said all that, I have to add that I don't think that's what Malachi meant. I think Malachi 3 means exactly what it looks like it means: he wants people to give more money to the temple, and he's using the blunt instrument of God's wrath as his tool. I still think that's abhorrent, but I have at least a grain of sympathy, because I too serve a religious institution that needs the gifts of the faithful to operate, in a context in which those gifts are dwindling. This year, again, our average giving is lower than the year before. This is why a couple of weeks ago, I sent out pledge cards to our members and friends, asking you to think about what you will give in 2021. We'd love for you to look at the letter that came with the card, read about the ministry that Lake Street is doing even in the middle of lockdown, and decide to begin giving or to increase your giving to support that ministry. So I'm inviting you to give.

But here's what I'm not saying. I'm not saying, like Malachi, that God will curse you if you don't give enough. I'm not even going to hint that if you give a lot God might bless you financially. God loves us, and love isn't transactional. What I am saying is that in his love, God gives some of us worldly blessings – but those blessings are not intended just for us. God loves all the world and wants all the world to be loved and cared for. If he's given us more than we need, that just means he's invited us to be a part of that love and care. Find a way to pass on God's generosity to others. Give to the church, give to Community Table, give somewhere. It's all God's anyway.