

Malachi 3:7

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[0 : 00] And please open to Malachi chapter 3 again. It's on page 802.! It's really one simple thing that I want to try and convey to you this morning that I want you to think about.

It's the command that God gives in verse 7 of Malachi 3. If you just drop your eye down. Three words. Return to me. Return to me.

I think it's pretty safe to say, without knowing what's going on in all of your lives this morning, it's pretty safe to say that in some way or another, all of us are prone to wandering.

We're prone to slipping away from God. And perhaps you're feeling that quite acutely this morning, at the moment, over the last week.

Maybe the period of departure has kind of been a bit more long term for you, if you're honest. But what I'm asking you to do this morning is to think seriously and to contemplate returning.

[1 : 22] At last. Returning to God. It's been a while since we were looking at Malachi, isn't it? And when we were here last, we saw earlier in chapter 3 and at the end of chapter 2, how God promised to send the Lord Jesus to purify the people of God.

And it was going to be a brutal and harsh process, wasn't it? Like a refiner's soap. A harsh soap. Or a refiner's fire. But God gives them the opportunity now to come back to him again.

To return. We get another one of the people's replies, don't we, in verse 7. How shall we return? We've seen this all through Malachi.

This kind of back chat with God from the people. The question, how shall we return, isn't really a question at all though. It's more of a stalling tactic.

It's like, isn't it, if you ask a toddler or a child, put your shoes on, how, daddy? Well, you know full well how to do it.

[2 : 28] You've done it. When it suits you, you're just stalling. It's that kind of thing. And so the issue in this chapter is not how to return. Actually, if truth be told, really, you know how to do this.

You know what it involves in your lives and hearts, people of God. The question really behind the question is why. How is it that we'd want to, the people are asking God here.

Their problem is not that they don't know how to, it's that they don't want to. And they think that they've got everything to lose and nothing to gain by returning to a relationship with God.

And because they're thinking that, because there are certain barriers in their thinking. Things that they believe about God that are not true, that are barriers to them returning to him.

And I want to look at some of those barriers, some of those false beliefs. And the first thing they think is that God isn't involved. God isn't involved enough in the life of his people, in the life of the church.

[3 : 43] Malachi, he's saying to them, isn't he, you may not realise it, but you have departed from God. As far as God is concerned, you've left the building, you're not at home, you're away.

And it has to do with what they think God is affected by in their tithing and in their contributions, their giving habits.

The question is asked, isn't it, in verse 8, will man rob God? It's a good question, isn't it? God owns everything, doesn't he? The cattle on a thousand hills belongs to him.

It all belongs to him anyway, doesn't it? He'll provide, won't he? What we do and how we live, they don't touch God. And of course that's true on one level, isn't it?

Of course God isn't worried or shaken or affected in one sense by what his creatures do or don't do. He is God. And yet, verse 8, some things that they are doing affect God.

[4 : 53] Do you see what he says in verse 8? You have been robbing me. You have been robbing me. The first step for them in returning to God is to realise that what they do with their lives and with their gifts, in this case, in Malachi 3, it's to do with their money, in one sense can hurt God.

He is involved in the life of his people and his church. That he can say this, you've been robbing me. Again, they come back to him, don't they, in verse 8.

How have we been robbing you? And he says, in your tithes and contributions, verse 8. Now if I was sat where you are right now, I'd be thinking to myself, are you really going to go there?

Again, tithes and contributions. It seems to be all we talk about, isn't it? We've just moved into this church building.

We frequently talk about giving, don't we? And paying off our debts. Yada, yada, yada. Same thing, over and over again, isn't it? And that is true, isn't it? I've got to say, I didn't plan to preach this text three weeks after we moved into the new building.

[6 : 16] It's here. And I've kind of got no choice in the matter. But actually, Malachi brings something especially helpful on the subject of tithing and of giving.

Because he shows that to not give as they should is more than an issue of just not giving. It's robbing God.

It's taking from God. And affecting him in some way. These tithes and offerings that Malachi refers to, they're not referring to the voluntary free will offerings that we hear about in the Old Testament.

There are different kinds of offerings, aren't they? These offerings are the obligatory offerings commanded in the law. These offerings were part of their obligations in covenant with God.

And ancient covenants, it's a kind of big word, isn't it? It works that in a picture of a king who rules over a nation. Imagine a king, he comes and he takes over a nation.

[7 : 30] And they would kind of pay him tribute, wouldn't they? The occupying king who made a covenant with the nation. They would pay him.

And in a way, the offerings work a little bit like that. They worked a little bit like taxes. But they weren't taxes like in an earthly government or economy like VAT or income tax.

They were to support the divine economy. They were to be used for worship and God's gospel cause. And if you go back into Deuteronomy and Numbers, you can see all about these tithes.

They were to be paid to meet the needs of the poor in the church community. They were to meet the needs of the Levitical priests. To fund worship and feasts and holy days for all of God's people.

But behind all of those functions and uses was God himself. It was his economy.

[8 : 39] In his kingdom, paying him tribute. And so what the people of God are doing here is like benefit fraud. It's like tax evasion.

They are setting up a kind of tax haven on a little island somewhere. They are stealing from the king's purse. It's not that they just don't give as they should.

But they thief. And in some sense, God feels that. You are robbing me. If you've been stolen from before, you feel that very deeply, don't you?

The intrusion of it. The idea that maybe someone has broken in and they've rummaged through your things. Or they've spent your money. And it's the feeling, isn't it, that God's people have been rummaging in his cupboards.

And they've been taking from his storehouse. We often use, don't we, the transcendence of God, that he is so high, as a bit of an excuse actually.

[9 : 48] Because we think he is far away. And he's not involved. That you can't rob God, can you? He owns everything.

And we twist that about him to think that he's not involved in any way. He's not involved enough to care what's in the church balance sheets.

Or what's on the church calendar. And we'd be wrong in thinking that. Because they are his accounts and his calendar. We get to look in at them.

Not the other way around. If you like, God is showing us here that he has an emotional life, doesn't it? He feels this. About you and me.

And you cannot have a good relationship with someone who thieves from you, can you? And apologies in advance for this. But Tim Vine tells a great joke. He says, thieves are getting more and more sophisticated these days.

[10 : 51] One night my wife rolled over in bed and said, I think there's a burglar downstairs. So I went and checked. And there was no one there. I got back into bed and then realised, I don't have a wife.

Sorry. You are not close to the one who steals from you, are you? It's just impossible. God says to them, you're not near me because I am involved.

I'm affected. And I'm affected by how you spend and how you plan and how you contribute. And you're robbing me. Not because I need the cash.

But because this is my kingdom. This is my economy. It's my church. Malachi is pretty blunt, isn't he? It is a question of the heart and of love for God.

But for him, it's a question of obligation as well. Of what we owe. We don't say, do we, to the inland revenue, I'm not paying my taxes because I just don't feel the love for the tax man at the moment.

[11 : 54] But on one level, that makes no difference whatsoever. And sometimes God simply says to us, whether you feel like it or not, you must do this.

You have to do this. It doesn't matter how much value you feel that you're getting from church. How much value you feel you're getting from the priests in their day.

Remember, the priests, as we heard about earlier in Malachi, weren't worth a dime, were they?

They were absolutely useless. And so you could have thought, couldn't you?

Well, I'm not contributing to the work of the priests. They're not much value for money at all. But the point is whether the priests were on form or not.

Whether the minister was delivering on fire sermons or not. Whether the debts were paid or not.

Whether there was a new roof or not. All of that actually was irrelevant.

[12 : 52] Because God is involved. And God is affected either way. God is affected and cares about his economy and his kingdom.

I've got to think to myself. I wonder, would I give as much in giving to the church if we weren't in debt?

Would I? Would I give less if I knew we were in the black? That's an interesting question. I probably would, actually, do those things, if I'm honest.

But to think like that is to miss the point. Because when we give, we're not, as I said earlier, just giving to the work of the church. Actually, we are giving to God.

We are giving to him, himself. We give to him what he already owns, yes. But it's a tribute to him. To his economy.

[13 : 55] And we don't often return in this sense. Because we don't recognise we've departed in the first place in this area. But we can grieve the Holy Spirit with our behaviour.

That the Lord Jesus, in the book of Revelation, he walks in the lampstands of the church, doesn't he? He is in the midst of us. He walks down the aisles as we meet together.

But so often I pretend that what I do with my money, well, it may affect the minister. It may be a difference between nice chairs and not so nice chairs.

But it won't affect God. He is up there. It'll have no bearing on him. And so we are fine. But you see, he is involved, isn't he?

He is involved in chairs and in wallpaper and Bibles and cups of tea and all the rest of it. But they don't believe that. They don't see that. They don't see that they are robbing God directly.

[14 : 54] They don't believe he's involved. The second barrier to returning is the belief that God isn't consistent. God isn't consistent. Returning to somebody that you've fallen out with can be a really risky thing, can't it?

It's an uncertain business. If you had a painful departure and a painful disagreement and there's, yeah, the two people have separated, coming together, it is risky.

The answer from the other person could be yes, couldn't it? Or it could be no. I don't want to know you. You know the story of the prodigal son.

We thought about it with the kids this morning. Think about what went through the son's mind as he thought, I'll go back to my father's house. It was an uncertain move, wasn't it?

As Jesus says in the story, he kind of came to himself and thought, I'll return. But he didn't know for certain how the father would take that. It's a really risky business.

[16 : 08] And we think sometimes, if I try and do that with God, I know I've not been near to him recently, but if I try and do that, the answer could be yes or it could be no.

But just think about that word for a moment. Return. Return. That word has something different in it to the command come, isn't it, or approach.

Both of which Jesus commands us to do. Because the word return, it implies a base. It implies a place that has never changed from a time earlier when we were close to him.

In the meantime. You can't return to someone or something who has moved, can you? Or changed in any way. And God says return, because even if we've gone away, he remains rock-like.

Returning implies constancy to the one that we return to. And that's exactly what he says in verse 6. For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

[17:29] Between people, it could be a yes. Or it could be a no. What will happen, but not so with God. We may have moved and changed and slipped, but we return to the unchanging God and the unchanging place that we left.

Because he doesn't change in his intention to save and receive his people. Not consuming the children of Jacob. And his unchangeableness is tested, isn't it, by their relentless departing. We're reminded that these people are chips off the old block. Children of Jacob. Do you remember Jacob? The conniving, plotting, selfish man.

He cheated Esau and his uncle Laban. Like father, like sons. And like children. They are just like him. And so are we, aren't we, in many ways.

But it's like when you return after a long trip. Back to the familiar place of home. The place of his grace. It is constant. So much so that 50 years earlier, in the time of Zechariah, an earlier prophet, his prophet starts with the same words.

[18:45] Return to me, says the Lord of hosts. While he was still a long way off, Jesus says, his father saw the son and had compassion on him.

The father ran to his son, threw his arms around him and kissed him. It is a constancy of a kind of reciprocal motion.

What do I mean there? He says, return to me and I'll return to you. He moves towards those who move towards him. With people it might be a yes, it might be a no.

But with God it's always a yes. Thomas Chisholm wrote, Thou changest not thy compassions. They fail not.

As thou has been, thou forever will be. But don't we struggle to believe that, don't we? We think, don't we, he'll react differently to me as he does to somebody else who returns.

[19:51] He won't have me back. I've changed so much, Lord. The things that I've done, that I would have never dreamt of doing. I've slipped. I've made big mistakes.

The old me would never have made. I'm a different person. God says, well, that may be, but I am not. Return to me.

He is always ready. He is consistently ready. When we return to him, he'll receive robbers and thieves back with joy. He's always warm.

He's not grudgingly forgiving. But warmly welcoming. But we think, don't we, he's not involved. We think he's not consistent in that.

And thirdly, and this is, I think, the main thing here. We think that God isn't generous. We think that God isn't generous.

[20:50] If you're thinking about returning to God, do you think you've got everything to lose in that? And you might have a lot to lose, actually, if other people know that you're a Christian.

Have you got everything to lose, though, and nothing to gain by coming to him? Do you think that God is there to take from you and not to give to you?

It's funny, in this passage, Malachi tells us that we can do a couple of things that we thought, technically, we could never do with God. Things that can't be done with God.

The first one is robbing him, isn't it? Well, we can do that, he says. But there's a second, if you look at verse 10. He says, bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts.

Alarm bells should be ringing there. Return to me, and test me. Put me to the test. Testing God is not supposed to be good.

[22:00] Right? Psalm 95, it talks about the generation that we've looked at in the evening services, in Numbers, who tested God in the wilderness.

That was not a good thing. It was a sign of unbelief. Jesus quotes Deuteronomy 6 to Satan, isn't he, when he's being tempted. He says, you shall not put the Lord your God to the test.

But God gives explicit permission to do that here. And it is a slightly different testing. He's saying, return to me and let me prove this something to you.

Let me prove that you will gain far more than you lost when you bring in the full offering to me.

When you return to me.

Test me in that. But it would feel very risky, wouldn't it, to do that. At this time, people of God, they weren't well off as a nation at all.

[23 : 06] They were skint. And they might have been saying, Malachi, what on earth are you doing preaching to us about offerings? And giving and tithing and all of that stuff.

Not now. We've got hardly anything. And that is why I was nervous about preaching this to you. But they're out of sync, aren't they, about God's ability to provide.

Of his generosity. He says, if you bring the full tithe into the storehouse, I'll open the windows of heaven and pour down blessing.

Do you not know how generous I am? That when you take risks and contribute, I don't take. I give. Just watch. And I think going deeper, it gets worse. It is not just that they don't believe he can bless.

[24 : 08] In a strange way, it's that they don't want him to. And looking at our hearts, I think this is true as well. You can sin by testing God's patience like they did in the wilderness.

But you can also sin by not testing him in this way. There's a really helpful passage in Isaiah 7. I wonder if you'd just turn there for a moment.

It's on page 571. Page 571. And this is the part of the story of King Ahaz.

Ahaz was not a good king. And in verse 11 and 12 of chapter 7, let me just read that for you. Again, the Lord spoke to Ahaz.

Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test. And he said, hear then, O house of David.

[25 : 18] Is it too little for you to weary men that you weary my God also? And the Lord offers Ahaz a chance, doesn't he? He gives him the opportunity for a sign to bolster his faith.

But he refuses. And he says, I don't want to put the Lord to the test. Yet given the Lord's invitation to do that, that refusal in this case was sinful.

Ahaz puts a pious coating on it, doesn't he? I don't want to test God. But actually what he didn't want to do was remove reasonable doubt that God could provide a sign.

At the heart of it was a refusal to see God's blessing. Not just a lack of belief in it. Don't show me a sign, God.

Don't bless me too much. And many churches don't grow simply because actually deep down the people don't want it to. We just don't want the risks.

[26 : 27] Returning to God means returning out on a limb. And putting him to the test. And stepping out in faith.

And evaluating him on the basis of his response. He says, doesn't he? I welcome that. Do that. Test me. Prove me. Let me prove to you how generous I am. On reflection, I've just been thinking about the new building.

It's wonderful, isn't it? And it's something really to be thankful for. I don't know though, if over the last few weeks, maybe this is just me, whether you can perceive something in yourself slightly unnerved by this new building.

It's new and it's different, isn't it? And maybe that's all it is. Maybe change is just hard. Maybe that's it. But actually, reflecting on this passage this week, what unnerves me about this wonderful building is that now I can no longer afford to think that God cannot provide.

I cannot keep making excuses for my low faith in that way. And maybe in a way it was easier, wasn't it, to do that in the old building when we were in there.

[27 : 45] Because we could pretend that God wasn't big enough to do it. And we could kind of keep going like that. And we didn't have to put him to the test.

We didn't kind of step out on a limb. But then, I guess we did, didn't we, in a way. We did do that. And the heavens opened. And God was proved to be generous in this whole experience.

And that is not the end, is it? In this building, that's not the end of God's generosity. Because God doesn't change.

And he's involved. And he's generous. In the biography of the Duke of Wellington, the writer, he worked on the research for the biography.

He looked through the records and the diaries and all the rest of it. But he says, in the biography, he had a breakthrough when he discovered some of Wellington's old check stubs. And he says, when I saw how he spent his money, then I knew the man.

[28 : 51] And our checkbooks, if you have a checkbook, say a lot about us, don't they? They show others how they could view us.

But actually, more importantly, our checkbooks really show us how we view God. Is he the giver of good gifts? Or is he a taker of our gifts?

And the problem is, sometimes we'd rather keep our gifts than take the risk of receiving his. We want to keep all we can, don't we? So that we can avoid going out on a limb. But do you see what they are doing here? They are withholding from God because they think he doesn't give. But the more they do that, the more they hold on, the less they get. Verse 9, You are cursed with a curse. For you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Around this time, we know that the harvests in Judah were not very good at all. [29 : 54] They were suffering hardship and famine. And often there is spiritual famine, isn't there? There is a lack of growth in churches. There's a dryness and a barrenness. Because God's people think God is more of a taker than a giver.

And they hold things very, very tightly. But we know, as we look at the Lord Jesus Christ, that the absolute opposite is true of that. For he gave his life, isn't it? He gave his all. And what happened a few days later? God opened up the windows at Pentecost and poured his Spirit out on the church. And there was massive worldwide growth. One sacrificial gift from the Lord Jesus Christ, the greatest gift of all, kind of sparked off, didn't it? Multiple gifts within the church. And in Christ we get this domino effect of offering and of gifts and God responding in exuberant generosity to the church. [31 : 02] And we've had a great taste of that as a church, haven't we? As many of us have given very generously. And we give of our time and our money and our gifts and look what's happened there.

But now, at a time like this, three weeks in to a new building, maybe now it's so important, isn't it, that we don't forget that God never changes. And he is always generous. And he is consistent in blessing those who return to him. Rosaria Butterfield speaks of her conversion and the whole experience of repentance and returning to God. And she says, I learnt the first rule of repentance, that repentance requires greater intimacy with God than with our sin. Repentance is an intimate affair. And for many of us, intimacy with anyone is a terrifying prospect. It could be yes, or it could be no. [32 : 12] Well, God says, bring the full tithe in. Bring yourself to me. Come out on a limb and test me, says God, for I never change.

And just see, just watch if I don't open the windows of heaven. Let's pray. Amen.