

Malachi 3:6-15

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[0 : 00] Please turn to Malachi chapter 3. It's the last book of the Old Testament. I will finish it the book next week. As we've gone through Malachi these last three weeks, we've seen that the people who Malachi was preaching to, they were marked by three things.

First of all, it was an age of questioning and doubt. Malachi is full of questions, isn't he? I don't know whether you noticed that as you've read through the book. There are question marks everywhere. You can almost tell the character of the book by the punctuation. Again and again, the people are asking questions. You have not loved, where have you loved us, they say to God, when God says I've loved you.

In the passage that was read, how have we robbed you? How can we return to you? There's 26 questions in the book of Malachi.

They are asking questions of God and God is asking questions of them. Their questions were one of doubt. It was also an age of carelessness and casualness.

[1 : 14] The people of God, they found themselves, when it came to sacrifices, when it came to gathering with the people of God, they looked for a lame animal and they looked for a blemish offering, something that was on offer.

The principle was really simple but actually very frightening. It was that anything will do for God. That's really what they were saying. Anything will do for God.

God is lucky to have us turning up. The third thing was, it was a stage of infidelity and instability. In their family lives and in their human relationships, lots of them just didn't last.

They gave themselves to someone really quickly but they grew tired very quickly. How they treated each other with unfaithfulness was how they were treating God.

It was one of the great characteristics of that generation. Amongst God's people, there are these three characteristics. Their arrogance in questioning God.

[2 : 24] How have we robbed you? You can almost see their chin in the air held high in defiance. Secondly, shabby sacrifices presented to God.

And thirdly, a shallow commitment to God. Nothing went deep with these people. And God is pleading with Israel.

And he's pleading with these people and he's warning them about their lives. That they are in a really critical condition. But the great tragedy was they didn't understand that.

They were willfully blind to the truth. They refused to see the truth about themselves. And so God comes again and again and again to them.

And he gives them opportunity to repent, to change, to turn. And so you find that in our passage, don't you? Where God says, return to me, in verse 7.

[3 : 28] Return to me. It's been the message of the book, clearly. Return to me. But Malachi is preaching to a people that refuse to listen to him. Daniel Defoe wrote, Robert C. Crusoe, he's got this line in it of a people who are not ashamed to sin, but too ashamed to repent.

Not ashamed to sin, but too ashamed to repent. That's the people of Malachi's day. And in the passage that was read to us from verse 6 to 12, there are three scenarios.

And again, the focus is on God and his relationship with his people. And so, first of all, we see, don't we, in verse 6, a changeless God and an unchanging people.

And let me explain what I mean. Look at the first half of verse 6.

For I, the Lord, do not change. God is simply proclaiming to his people and he's declaring this glorious truth, which is, in many ways, the basis on which we as believers live and pray.

[4 : 49] It's that God is different to us. He is unchanging. Six words. I, the Lord, do not change.

Six life-changing words. That's the message of the Bible. It is one of the essential elements of the character of God.

I, the Lord, do not change. So, from generation to generation, he is the same. His love every morning is steadfast. It doesn't go and disappear with the morning mist.

His mercies, they are new every morning. Greater to your faithfulness, they say to God, because God is unchanging. He is, as James reminds us, he's the father of lights, with whom there's no variation or shadow due to change.

And one of the things that the Christian church has always gloried in, and that Christian believers glory in today, is that God does not change. It's one of the things that Christians discover early on in their Christian life, about the character of God, that his love does not change.

[6:06] Even though my love for him changes a lot. That unlike human love, God's love is not a response to what he finds in me. He is like a steadfast rock.

A rock of ages that never changes. And the fact that God does not change is the foundation of everything in our Christian living.

He is an anchor for our souls. He is a rock to stand on. But notice the second half of the verse. Verse 6. Jacob was a great schemer.

I'm not consumed. Because you, God, are unchanging, we're not destroyed. You see, his love to them, his mercy, his patience with them is unchanging.

No matter how long they go on refusing and refusing to return to the Lord, he stretches out his hands in mercy. Now, you can understand it in that way, but I think actually the context is there's a greater depth to it than that.

[7:17] There's another way of translating this. There's another way of seeing it. I, the Lord, do not change, but you, O sons of Jacob, you've not changed either.

That's particularly brought out in verse 7, isn't it? He's saying this very simple truth. I, the Lord, do not change, but actually, you're sons of Jacob.

There's very little change in you. I think the parallelism is there, isn't it? Verse 7. I, the Lord, do not change. Are you still the sons of Jacob? That twister.

With all the characteristics of Jacob in your heart. Ever since then, you've been exactly the same. You've turned away from my decrees. You've not kept on going with obedience.

You're always the same. You've gone on being a twisted people like Jacob was. Right from the beginning. So he says, I, the Lord, do not change.

[8:17] And in a totally different sense, you haven't changed either. People of God, you've still got the same arrogant attitude. The same shabby sacrifices.

The same shallow commitment. And then he pleads with them, doesn't he? As if he holds on his arms and God says, return to me. And I will return to you.

This, this lack of change, this kind of spiritual stagnation or falling back, or the absence of progress, that is a really serious thing in a Christian's life.

And the eternal God comes to us this morning over whom he has wept and broken his heart and yearned and longed for. Over whom he shed mountains of love in Jesus Christ, and yet he looks about us, and maybe he says, and actually you've not really changed.

One little bit. The same questioning. The same shabby sacrifice. The same shallow commitment.

[9:30] But here's the words. Return to me. And I will return to you. It's a bridge into the next section. The unchanging God and a people who refuse to change.

And then from verse 7, you find the grieved God, and an insensitive people. It's as if they've been anesthetized to his voice.

You know, you go to the dentist and he gives you those injections. He waits five minutes. And then he says, can you feel anything? And you can't feel a thing. It becomes more apparent, doesn't it, in the book of Malachi, that this really does describe the truths about the relationship between God and his people.

God is grieved, distressed, in his heart about them, and they did not know it. They heard God's voice speaking to them, and they wondered, what are you going on about?

What is all the fuss over? And he comes and he addresses them, and he says this. He says, verse 8, will man rob God?

[10:43] Will a man rob God? Return to me, and I will return to you. And then they say, well, how are we to return? Where are we to return from? What is it that you're saying is wrong with us?

Do you see the problem? The problem is, they don't recognize there is any problem. They thought everything is going really fine in their spiritual lives, and they're blinded to the truth about themselves.

In fact, they're blinded about two things, aren't they? They're blind to the fact that they've drifted away from God. You know what it's like if you go swimming in the sea, and you swim in the sea, and you're in for a little bit, and you suddenly realize just how far you've drifted.

You get out of the water, and you're half a mile from where your stuff is, because the water has pulled you away. You didn't even realize it when you were in the sea. You've drifted. You've got no idea that you were drifting, and God says, return to me.

Return to me. And they'd not even realized they'd drifted away. They had no awareness of spiritually drifting away from God.

[12:00] Well, they were unaware, and this is even more serious, of the absence of God. You see how God says, return to me, and I will return to you.

They're unaware of the fact that God has withdrawn himself from them. They assumed, we turn up every Sabbath, we're there.

We're there in your gatherings. We gather in your name, but he's absent. Do you realize that's possible?

the absence of God for blessing. The absence of God for blessing. Do you ever think about that?

To cherish the presence of God and that it might have something to do with your spiritual condition.

Do you think it's possible for people, for a church, to have experienced the presence and the blessing of God and for the glory of God to depart?

[13:12] Do you think that's possible? Go around healing. Go and see the churches that once preached the gospel, that once proclaimed Jesus Christ, that knew something of his blessing and now they are Hindu temples, Kasha rooms.

So doubt that that happens, isn't it? It could happen here. But God says, return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord. The people still came, they went through the outward sacrifices, they offered shabby sacrifices to God, but they kept up the sacrifices.

And God says, it's only when you return to me that I will return to you. He is an aggrieved God and they are an insensitive people.

And they're unaware of how the heart of God is broken by their sinfulness. They come back to God, don't they? They hold their chin up, they come back again and they say, verse 7, you say, how shall we return?

And God puts his finger on what they're least, what they're most likely to notice. They wouldn't have noticed some theological issue or some profound issue, but do you understand what God puts his finger on?

[14:33] He says, you've been robbing me. I think they understood the language of robbery. Will a man rob God?

Yet you, and before he got it out, you can imagine responding, will a man rob God? Never. Well, he says, I know you've been robbing me.

I don't know whether you know what it's like to be robbed. Undoubtedly, most of you will. About two years ago, it was a Saturday afternoon, we were watching a film and we heard noises in our front garden.

And I, Claire got up and looked out the window and said, someone is stealing, someone is stealing Noah's bike. And as I looked up, I saw this guy riding off down the road with Noah's bike.

So I ran out of the house, jumped in my car, drove as fast as I could down the road, overtook the man, didn't, kind of handbrake turn, but stopped the car, got out, and grabbed the bike and said to the man, get off my bike.

[15:40] Which he did. He then proceeded to walk down the road and I shouted some things at him, which I won't repeat here. I was so angry. As a preacher, never tell a story where you're the hero of the story, apart from this kind of story, all right?

My heart was pounding. I was so angry. I was so furious. Really, really angry. I'm sure you've experienced that.

That somebody had a temerity to steal something from you, to rob. It makes us rightfully angry, doesn't it? Will a man rob another man?

Well, sure, yeah. Will a man rob God? And do you begin to understand what it means to rob God? What is it?

It is to take what belongs to him. It is to take what belongs to him, what he has formed, and what he has created, and above all, what he has redeemed at the price of the blood of his only son, and it's stolen from him, and God is furious about it.

[16:52] And when they say to him, come on now, how do we rob you? He puts his finger, doesn't he, on this most obvious thing. He says, in your tithes and your offerings.

And you are under a curse, the whole nation, because you are robbing me. And of course, what he's speaking about is their material possessions. Tithing in the Bible has very deep roots.

The person who gave tithes usually gives tithes to a superior. So, you have, we learn that from Abraham giving tithes to Melchizedek, they were from the inferior to the superior.

And God had commanded that his people were to recognize that he had given everything that they had by giving tithes to God because he commanded it. The tithes were to be given to the Levites for the service of the temple and for the worship of God and for the functioning of the people of God.

And it was really a picture, it was a picture to tell the people of Israel that all the resources that they had belonged to God. Everything that they had belonged to the Lord.

[18:07] Not just the first tenth, but the other nine tenths. In fact, when you look at the Old Testament, the tithe was nearer, about 23 or 24%.

But the principle was that God first had his call on me. And God's principles of generosity are not lesser, are they, in the New Testament.

God has first call on me, on my money, on my resources, on my energy, on my time, on my love, on my affection, my mental powers, everything I have and do, God gave me, and God has first call on it.

And God says to the people of Israel in those days, you're robbing me, because of the way that you deal with those things. I enjoy biographies, like you do, I'm sure.

And I read a really interesting thing about someone who was writing a biography, they were researching for a biography. And people research for a biography of someone at a great length, don't they, and great cost in time and energy.

[19:17] You've got to do all the research writing. And they asked the guy who was writing the biography, where did you learn most about the man? And he said, really interestingly, he said, from the stubs of his check book.

Let me explain to you what a check book is. You get it sometimes from old people at your birthdays. Let me put it another way. I learned most about the man from his bank statement.

He went through his bank statement and he could tell what was important to the man. He could tell from the bank statement what was his priority. It's just what Jesus says, where your treasure is, there your heart is also.

So let me ask myself, let me ask you, what does your bank statement say about your relationship with God? God says, you rob me.

You rob me in tithes and offerings. robbing God means making my own and using for myself what belongs rightly to him.

[20:31] And that is absolutely everything. So for the Christian believer, God has given you absolutely everything and everything belongs to him. What do you have that you have not received?

Paul says. And you say, well, if you're going to live that way, that's pretty extreme, isn't it? That must be the very exceptional kind of missionary type of Christian.

Let me tell you, that is plain, ordinary, basic Christianity. It's Christian living at its most basic. My dad went to speak at a Christian union meeting of students back in the 80s.

and they had a quiz before he got up to speak. With an overhead projector and acetates on the wall, remember those? And it was a true or false quiz.

And the aim of the quiz was that it would show us something about ourselves. So they put these true and false questions up. And so you had a shout out. Was Abraham Sarah's husband true or false?

[21:41] And all the students shouted true. There's loads of them there. was Jacob Isaac's father? True or false?

They all kind of thundered out their answer. Was Jesus born in Nazareth? True or false? And they all thundered out false. And it went on something true, something false. And then the slide was put up on the screen.

Take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold. True or false? False. false. And they all shouted out earlier on.

Was Abraham Sarah's husband true? But when it came to that last slide, take my silver and my gold, not a mite would I withhold. There was silence.

True or false? you have robbed me, says the Lord. And they were totally unaware of it. I can leave it there and you would feel really uncomfortable a little bit at the moment, but then you'd thank me for it.

[22 : 51] But I want to speak to the members of this church. There are really, really encouraging things about church life at the moment, really wonderfully encouraging things. The Lord is growing the church and we're really blessed in that way.

We're seeing people become more like the Lord Jesus. That is a really, really encouraging thing. The ministries are growing, aren't they? Really, really encouraging. But what isn't encouraging and what is quite discouraging is how very few of us are sacrificially giving.

I don't know who gives what. Please don't think I know that. I can barely understand the balance sheet. But I do understand this, that there are very few of us who are tithing. And there are very few of us who are giving sacrificially.

And I wonder, does God say to us this morning, are you robbing God? God, you say to me, Paul, we live in one of the most expensive cities in the world.

How dare you talk like this? And I think God would answer back, all that you have is from me. What does your bank statement say about your relationship with the Lord?

[24 : 05] God? And I changed God, and I have changed people, and I grieved God, and I have insensitive people.

And then stick with me on this. Thirdly, we see the challenging God, and a heaven-blessed people. So let me give you the reasons why I'm encouraging you to tithe and to be generous.

Listen to this challenge. Look at verse 10. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Storehouse, there is, it's a picture of the temple, that's what he's referring to.

The place where God meets with his people, that there may be food in my house, and thereby put me to the test, says to the Lord of house. In the Bible, I'm told a number of times, do not put God to the test.

And yet, in Malachi 3, you are told this morning, and I am told, put God to the test. Prove me, this day is another way of translating it. Prove me today, God says, test me today, and see whether I'm true to my word.

[25 : 13] In your giving, give generously. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so there may be food in my house, the whole thing, everything, everything that you are, everything that you ever hoped to be, everything grace has made you, everything nature has made you, every gift, every ability, every moment of your time, every ounce of your energy, bring it all, says God.

And that's the challenge. It's an amazing promise, isn't it? It's altogether amazing. Look what it says, it says this, see if I will not open the windows of heaven, I don't know whether there are windows in heaven, but it's a lovely picture, windows of heaven for you and pour down upon you a blessing until there is no more need.

I'll rebuke the devourer for you, that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil and your vine, vine in the field, shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

God says, I'll open the windows of heaven and I will pour down blessing upon you until there is no more need. water. You walk by the canal, the locks, there, and you'll see it when you sometimes by the canal, the locks are holding back the water and then they open them just a little bit and the water comes pouring through.

But it's not really like that, it's much more traumatic than the Brentford locks. You look up on YouTube, there's whole dams in China where the dam bursts and water comes flooding over.

[26 : 57] The flood tides come sweeping over. And here's the picture, it's the flood tide of the blessing of God and sweeping over a whole community.

Just look at that last little phrase in verse 10. Three words, no more need.

I will pour out blessing upon you until no more need. It happened in David's date, didn't it? Where there was no more need.

And God longs to pour out his blessing upon his people. And we pray, don't we, for revival.

And we pray for the blessing of God and for his kingdom to come and for the church to grow and congregations to be planted. And we long for that.

[28 : 02] And God says to us, what about your giving? What about your giving? One of the things that I want to really encourage you with today is this.

If you want a heart for God and a heart for God's church, give financially. Let's just say you invested in Burger King.

All right? I suspect many of you don't care for Burger King. All right? It's to you. You've got no interest in Burger King. You don't eat there, you don't like it. But you put your money into Burger King. You invest in Burger King.

Suddenly, you follow what Burger King's doing. You see whether the share price is going up or down. You see whether the restaurants are doing well or not.

You suddenly become interested in Burger King because you've invested in it. And one of the ways that the Bible says that you get a heart for God and you become more interested in his work and you begin to know him better is by investing in God's work.

[29 : 18] And you say to me, Paul, you sound like a prosperity preacher. You're right. Tell the masses, Paul Levy's a prosperity preacher. All right? What am I saying to you?

I'm saying to you, give of yourself. Give to the Lord's work. And what is the promise? He will pour out blessings upon you. I, the Lord, do not change.

Return to me and I will return to you. I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing.

until there is no more need. Then all the nations will call you blessed and you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

Let's pray.