

Wearying and Robbing the Lord

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[0 : 00] Lovely words, aren't they? My flesh and heart may fail, but God will constantly be. Isn't that good? Well, let's turn now to God's Word.

We're reading in Malachi, chapter 2. If you're using one of the church visitor Bibles, you'll find that on page 802.

And we've been working our way through Malachi the last few Sunday evenings, and we've reached the end of chapter 2.

We pick it up in verse 17, and we'll read through to chapter 3, verse 12. And as we've seen, there's a series of disputes through the book of Malachi.

The Lord makes charges against the people of Israel, and each time they respond in ignorance of their own position, how? How have we done this?

[0 : 59] And we'll see that again twice in this passage this evening. So chapter 2, verse 17. You have wearied the Lord with your words, but you say, how have we wearied him?

By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. Or by asking, where is the God of justice?

Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

And the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming? And who can stand when he appears?

For he is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.

[1 : 59] And he will purify the sons of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver. And they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. Then the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord, as in the days of old and as in the former years.

Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker and his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner.

Do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

From the days of your fathers, you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.

Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

But you say, how shall we return? Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, how have we robbed you?

[3 : 21] In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse. For you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. 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. If I will not open the windows of heaven for you, and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts.

Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Good. Good. Well, please do turn back to Malachi chapter 2, and we'll spend a few moments now looking at that together.

Malachi chapter 2. I wonder, are you ever inclined to assume the worst about other people?

[4 : 47] All of us will tend toward being the cynic at times, I think, and we'll often find ourselves assuming the worst in people's motivations from time to time.

Maybe it's just me, but I quite like that program, Grumpy Old Men on TV. It's great stuff, and they assume the worst of everyone all the time. It's quite entertaining, but I'm not like that all the time,

honest.

I'm saying that partly in jest, but far more seriously. Do you ever find yourself assuming the worst about the Lord, questioning his intentions, his goodness towards you?

That's really the mood of the people here in Malachi. And this is far from lightheartedness. This is deadly serious. Malachi, through his book, exposes again and again, through this prophecy, the people's true state before the Lord.

And theirs is an attitude that doubts the goodness of God. Why bother with God when he doesn't seem to bother with us, is what they think. They look at their attitude, their situation.

[5 : 58] They look at their circumstances, and they conclude that God mustn't much care for them. And it's that conviction, that doubt about God, doubt about his covenant care for his people, about his love for them.

That doubt drives their carelessness when it comes to their covenant obedience. They are careless, half-hearted. And we've seen that over the past few weeks, haven't we?

Whether it's how they treat the sacrificial system, whether it's through the priests, what they're teaching. Or, indeed, in their marriages. The people are, in all areas of life, holding light to what God has commanded, and they don't even see it.

Malachi exposes the reality. He tells them what God really thinks. What he really thinks of them and what they're doing. And that, of course, is the only opinion that really matters.

You and I can think whatever we like about ourselves, about God, but we must remember that we, in the end, are only finite creatures. God is the all-knowing creator.

[7 : 10] His is the only opinion that really matters. And here, God speaks again. He exposes the people about their attitude.

And it's in two areas. Two more charges are leveled at the people. And the two charges against the people are these. First, they weary the Lord.

Chapter 2, 17 to chapter 3, verse 6. And secondly, from verse 7 to 12, they rob the Lord. And in both cases, it seems that the people have considered their circumstance.

They've looked around them. And they've concluded that it must not be worth serving the Lord wholeheartedly. They see the wicked prospering.

They see their crops failing in the field. They hold back the full tithe. And they think, as we'll see next week in chapter 3, verse 14, they think to themselves, what is the profit in keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

[8 : 17] What profit? What good does it do us to throw everything we have in with the Lord? Let's just hold back a bit. Let's just hedge our bets. And the Lord, through the prophet Malachi, he exposes the absolute foolishness of that sort of thinking.

He does it for God's people then and today. So let's look at the two charges the Lord brings against the people. Firstly, they're wearying of him.

They're wearying of the Lord. And we see that the Lord will bring judgment on those who do not return to him. So look down at me, verse 17.

The people are wearying the Lord by asking, where is the God of justice? And in response, God promises that he will come to purify and bring judgment.

Are you ready? Is the message. Are you ready? The charge comes there in verse 17.

[9 : 23] You weary the Lord with your words. And again, the people are totally oblivious to it. How? They say, how have we wearied him? Well, by saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord.

And he delights in them. All by asking, where is the God of justice? Now, theirs is not just a cry for justice in an unjust world.

That is a question that people down through every age have asked. People have, in every age, observed the world. They've seen injustice and suffering.

And they cry out, why is this so? Where is the God of justice? But that is not the sentiment here.

The people there in Malachi's day, they've made observations about the world around them.

They observe those who do evil prospering, as we do today. And you can, I'm sure, think of examples of folk like that, people you know, who are triumphing in life, but really quite unpleasant people.

[10 : 32] But those in Malachi's day went a step further. They not only observe that such people prosper, but more than that, that those who do evil deeds are good in the sight of the Lord.

He delights in them. That's what they think. It's not the question, why do bad things happen to good people? But it's the opposite. Why do good things happen to bad people?

And it's a question that they're posing amongst themselves. Rather than, as the psalmists do, cry out their questions to God. This is not a Godward question. They're talking amongst themselves. And the direction of speech is important. Not just here in chapter 2, but all the way through Malachi, the people's words about God to one another are the problem. And it's worth just making the observation that words we use about God with each other are really important.

We really do influence how each other think, how each other behaves. It's worth thinking about our words about God with each other. But the people here, they observe evildoers prospering.

[11 : 44] And they draw the conclusion that either the God of justice they read about in Scripture has gone, or that he has changed his mind about whose side he's on.

They couldn't see a visible connection between the obvious sin they observed and God's judgment. In fact, they thought they observed the opposite.

They thought that God was rewarding their wickedness. And that's what the people then were thinking. They observed this awfulness, this wickedness. They see them prospering.

They conclude that God is prospering them. Where's the judgment? Where is the God of justice? And God's people today are not immune from such thinking, are we?

Lifting our eyes from Scripture, shutting our ears off to his words, forgetting all that God reveals in his word about himself. We can find ourselves drawing conclusions about God from what we observe.

[12 : 43] Not just around us with colleagues, friends, and neighbors, but what we're bombarded with on Facebook, TV, on the radio. The evil often do prosper. You may observe a church in decline, Christian morality being legislated out of existence on a regular basis.

And on those observations alone, you may very much doubt God's care for his people. You may conclude that he must delight in those who do evil.

They're prospering. Where is the God of justice? Where is the God of justice, you may ask yourself? Well, we need to listen to God's response, as those in Malachi's day needed to, too. Look on to chapter 3 to see his response. The Lord promises that he will come to purify and to judge. But he warns them, are you ready for that?

Do you really want the God of justice to come in judgment? And there are two stages to the promised coming of the Lord. First, there's a messenger, verse 1.

[13 : 54] A messenger will be sent, who prepares the way before the Lord. Now, all the Gospels refer or allude to this verse in Malachi, and they identify the promised messenger as John the Baptist.

And this messenger at the start of verse 1 is distinct from the messenger of the covenant in the second half of the verse. Two different people are in view here. The messenger of the covenant is the Lord himself, the one whose coming is prepared by the messenger at the start of verse 1.

And the Lord, the Lord who they so eagerly seek, will come suddenly to his temple. But, verse 2, who can endure the day of his coming?

Who can stand when he appears? Well, the people at Malachi's day should have been more careful what they wish for, seems to be the implication. The God of justice you seek is coming.

Are you ready? Just look at how that day is described, how the Lord himself is described. Look at verse 2. He is like a refiner's fire.

[15 : 07] He's like a fuller's soap. He will sit as a refiner in pure fire of silver. Now, don't domesticate these descriptions.

This isn't a nice, cozy fire in the deep midwinter. This isn't dove soap that will leave your skin smoother than its competitors. No, these are terrifying images of God's judgment.

A refiner's fire. A fiercely hot fire that would refine and make a distinction between the pure, precious metal and the dross which would be discarded.

And full of soap. This was a harsh, alkaline thing that would be used to clean, hard to get rid of stains.

It was a harsh alkaline. It's not a soft soap. And that coming day of judgment will be a day that purifies and cleans, says Malachi.

[16 : 09] A day that divides and destroys those who do not fear the Lord. Are you ready for that day, says Malachi? It is a sober, serious warning.

And the day of the Lord that the people so hope for here will not be their day of vindication, but rather it will be a day of purifying destruction for them as well as their enemies.

The evildoers they see prospering. It will for them be a day of destruction as well if they refuse to repent and turn to the Lord.

There will be a distinction made on that day, says Malachi. Look on to chapter 3, verse 18. You shall see a distinction between those who are righteous and the wicked.

And for those who refuse to fear God, that coming day of judgment will be terrifying. But for those who do fear him, for those who do turn to him, it will be a day of joy and restoration.

[17 : 23] But it's a day that seems to take place in two stages. Stage 1 and verse 3 will be the purification of the sons of Levi, leading, verse 4, to the offering of all the people being pleasing to the Lord.

And then stage 2, verse 5, then the Lord will draw near to you for judgment. And that day is coming, says Malachi to God's people then.

Are you ready? Fear the Lord. Return to him and he will return to you. Heed the warning of chapter 4, verse 1.

For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the Lord of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.

But for those that return to him, there will be abundant blessing. Look at verse 2 of chapter 4. But for you who fear my name, the son of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings.

[18 : 36] You shall go out leaping like the cars from its stall, and you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet. On the day when I act, says the Lord of hosts.

It's a day of distinctions. For those who fear the Lord, it's a day of leaping like cars from the stall.

But for those who refuse, there will be a day of burning like an oven.

It's a stern warning, isn't it? And it's a two-stage thing, the purification and judgment.

And as those who live after the first coming of the Lord Jesus Christ, we can make sense of this two-stage distinction. Jesus, in his first coming, came to do away with sin by his sacrificial death on the cross.

He has brought about the promised purification. But he has delayed the day of judgment. We await his second coming. The Lord has fixed a day when he will judge all the world in righteousness.

[19 : 50] And that day of judgment has not yet come. The Lord, in his grace, is waiting. Where is the God of justice, you may ask?

Well, he has begun to fulfill all that Malachi looked forward to here. In the Lord Jesus Christ, the promised messenger of the covenant has come. Through his death on the cross, he has purified all who call upon his name, who trust in him for the forgiveness of their sin.

And for those that do that, for all who fear him, for all who return to him, for all who will humble themselves before him, the day of judgment that will surely come, well, that holds no fear.

It will be a day of healing and joy for all who return to him. And because of Christ, all who are his are pleasing to the Lord.

We who are his know that all of justice demands in our name has been fully satisfied. There is now no more condemnation for all who are in Christ.

[21 : 10] But more than that, more than personal salvation, the fact that there is a day of reckoning to come means that no present injustice that we find so hard, no past injustice that causes us so much pain will go unaccounted for.

Everyone will one day be held to account. The wicked may prosper today. They often do. But on that day, the day that Malachi promises will come, the day we know will come because Christ has already come.

On that day, justice will be done. But for those who refuse to repent, here's the warning.

For those who will not fear his name, there is only judgment. The Lord will be a swift witness against you.

That day will be like a burning oven when all the arrogant, all the evildoers will be stubble. And that's not just a quirk of the Old Testament.

[22 : 25] In the New Testament, the Lord Jesus himself speaks more plainly than anyone else about the judgment that is to come. And he certainly does not tone down his language.

Listen to the words of the Lord Jesus. When the Son of Man comes in his glory and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne.

Before him will be gathered all the nations. And he will separate people one from another as shepherds separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on his left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. And then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed into the eternal fire, prepared for the devil and his angels.

It's not just Malachi. It's the Lord Jesus. That day of distinctions. There's no third way. It's one or the other. Are you ready for him to judge you?

[23 : 43] Can you endure the day of his coming? You can't make yourself ready by topping up your good works or increasing your giving to charitable causes.

No. It's only by staking all on Christ, trusting in his past work, accepting with a believing heart the entire suffering and death of Christ, and thereby receiving forgiveness of sins and eternal life.

That is the only way. And that means humbling yourself, setting aside your pride, and submitting to him. That is what it is to fear God.

That is what it is to return to him. And he promises, he promises for all who do that, he will return to them.

Well, it's a sobering warning, isn't it? The people were wearying the Lord. But Malachi says, the Lord will bring judgment on those who do not return to him.

[24 : 49] It's a sober warning, isn't it? For those who do not repent. That's the first charge. Let's look on to the second, from chapter 3, verse 7 onwards.

And we see here the charge as they are robbing the Lord. And we see here that the Lord will pour out blessing on those who do return to him. The people are robbing the Lord through withholding the full tithe.

And in response, the Lord calls them to return to him and to experience the full blessings of the covenant. And it seems that at the root of the people's behavior towards God is again this issue of distrust.

Is it really worth serving the Lord? We've just seen the people have made the observation that they see the wicked prospering. What good does it do to serve God then?

If the wicked get away with it, if they prosper, why should we carry on? And so too in the second half of our passage, is it really going to be worth us giving the full tithe to God?

[25 : 58] If only he looked after us a little better. If he did that, then we would consider giving the full return of the tithe. But God isn't really looking after us, so we'll just keep it back a bit.

And again, the people are totally oblivious to what's going on. The charge is leveled in verse 8. You are robbing me. And the people respond, as they've done throughout Malachi, with the words, how? How have we robbed you, God? And the answer is straightforward. End of verse 8. In your tithes and contributions.

And it seems, what we go on to read in the following verses, that the people are experiencing the curse of God. The economy is in something of a downturn, a recession, or maybe a full-blown depression.

The fields are not producing the crops they once did. And in their poverty, the people feel justified in holding back the full tithe. The Lord has been stingy with us, and so we'll return the favor.

[27 : 09] Now, they perhaps didn't quite justify themselves in that language, but that was the reality of their thinking. Their attitude to giving to the Lord, giving things of monetary value, the tithe, the contributions, their attitude to what they owed God was a window into what they really thought of Him.

Their giving exposed their true attitude to the Lord. Now, they couldn't claim to love the Lord their God with all their heart, their soul, and might if they didn't give what was owed to Him from their fields.

They couldn't claim to love God if they were holding things back. But the people have it all the wrong way around. They think that the Lord has withheld blessing in the first instance, and so they feel justified in responding with half-hearted obedience and the less-than-required time.

But in fact, the opposite is true. The Lord is responding in the way that He has promised to do in response to their disobedience. In the background of these verses here in Malachi are the great

blessings and curses which we looked at last Sunday morning in Deuteronomy 28 and 29. And Malachi here reminds the people of God's promises of rewards for obedience and discipline for disobedience. As in Haggai chapter 1, the problem is that God has withheld agricultural blessings for their wrong attitude just as He promised to do many hundreds of years before.

[28 : 45] Just read back over Deuteronomy 28 and 29. You'll see it. It's exactly what the Lord promised. And the Lord, in exposing that attitude, calls them to return to Him so that He can prove His faithfulness to His word, not in curses, but in blessing.

Look at what He says. Look on to verse 10. Bring the full tithe into the storehouses, says the Lord, and thereby put me to the test.

If I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. So the call to return to the Lord in verse 7 is not merely something that people were to vocalize, but to demonstrate concretely in the bringing in of the full tithe.

Repentance then and now is always a matter of declaration and demonstration. Repentance is concrete action in addition to confession.

And as His people return to Him, as they bring in the full tithe, God promises to return to them and in doing so He will pour out abundant blessing upon them. And He's only promising to do what He promised generations ago in the covenant at Sinai, in that if His people obey Him, they will enjoy agricultural, material blessing in the land that He's promised them.

[30 : 23] But it's not just that. Look on to verse 12. All nations will call you blessed for you will be a land of delight.

if His people are obedient, the Lord will pour out abundant blessing upon them to the extent that they will be noticeable, visible to the surrounding nations.

And that will be to fulfill God's great purposes for His people. Remember the promises to Abraham, promises of blessing such that in Him all the families of the earth shall be blessed.

They will be a light shining brightly in the world, drawing others, to the God of Israel. And these words provide for God's people today the same stark warning and promise of abundant blessing for all who return to Him.

The people then were withholding the full tithe, that is the payments and offerings required by God's covenant with His people. It was a tenth of the produce of the land that was given to support the Levites.

[31 : 34] it was their inheritance in return for the work they did while serving in the tent of meeting. Now there is today no longer the same requirement to tithe in quite the same way that God's people did then.

There was no stipulation of 10% in the New Testament. But even for the Old Testament people of God, the tithe was only the beginning. The tithe then didn't complete the people's obligations in terms of giving.

And so for God's people today, surely the expectations of giving to the Lord and His work must be greater rather than less. We live in light of all that God's people looked forward to then and anticipated.

We look back on promises fulfilled of the messenger of the covenant who has now come to His temple. And surely we have even more reason to be grateful than they.

Even more reason to be generous to our Father in heaven. All we have is from His hand. And so the question this passage poses for us is one of attitude rather than amount.

[32 : 44] Our true attitude to God will be seen in our generosity to Him and to His church. And so the question is, are you, are we, robbing God?

what is the state of your giving at the moment? If we see God as a gracious giver, then we too will seek to be generous givers so that the work of gospel proclamation can flourish, so that others all across the globe can know the Lord as we do.

But if we see God as the people did then as a stingy taskmaster, then we'll easily become weary, counting the pennies we drop into the collection.

We'll be reluctant givers. We'll be counted robbers. But remember here too, the promises of blessing for obedience to the Lord.

He doesn't simply demand that they bring the tithe. He promises abundant blessing for when they do, verse 10, the Lord will open the windows of heaven. Just put me to the test, says the Lord.

[33 : 54] How does that apply today? Are we drifting into prosperity gospel territory here? Well, the New Testament doesn't promise abundant material blessing for the believer yet.

One day, yes, absolutely, when Christ returns, his people will know untold blessings in the new creation. But what about the here and now? What about today?

Well, the Apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians 9, touches on these very matters. He says this, whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.

And whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he's decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

And God is able to make all grace abound to you so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work. He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness.

[35 : 10] righteousness. Now it is not material blessings that the Apostle Paul has in view here, but spiritual ones. Those who give abundantly to the work of the gospel, they will receive spiritual blessings, which are themselves the fruit of that giving.

The Apostle Paul here speaks of a harvest of righteousness. So whilst elsewhere the Apostle Paul talks about the eternal rewards for present giving that will be ours in the new creation, there are real spiritual rewards in the here and now for those who sow generously.

Look around at the folk you most look up to in church here. Look at those who have an abundance of spiritual blessings. Now my guess is in light of Malachi and the teaching of 2 Corinthians that there is an attitude and reality of generous monetary giving there.

Do you want to reap likewise in spiritual blessing? Well consider what you sow. Yes, in your time.

Yes, with your talents, but also with your money. Those who reap generously will sow greatly. And as a church, as we are generous to the Lord, as the Lord pours out his rich blessings on those who are obedient to him, that will be noticed by those outside the church.

[36 : 54] And the promise of verse 12 will be true of a generous church, church. A church that is obedient to God's word in all areas of life, and not least in the area of giving, will be deeply attractive to the watching world, to our friends who see and observe all that we do.

Those who bring along to church, they all observe that. Our God is a generous God. God. That's the sense of this second half of the passage.

He's a God who loves to bless his people. All we have in this world is by his hand, and so he calls his people not to rob him, but to be generous givers.

And just watch as he pours out his blessing upon all who take him at his word. Put me to the test, says the Lord. Our God is no man's debtor.

Now, don't mishear me. I'm not saying that if you give generously, everything's going to be great.

No. But those who give generously will reap a harvest of righteousness. You can't hope to reap that if you sow with little.

[38 : 14] Reap what you sow, and know that our God is no man's debtor. So if you found yourself doubting God's goodness, doubting his generosity, doubting his justice, well, hear the words of Malachi this evening.

He is the God of justice, and the judge has already come. He has brought purification, and he will run what they return to bring judgment.

Are you ready? Are you ready? But know, too, that he is the God of abundant generosity.

All you have is from his hands. And Malachi asks, are you robbing him? And perhaps, for you tonight, you need to hear the gracious call of your heavenly father.

father. And it's the great call of Malachi. Return to me. Return to me. And I will return to you.

[39 : 29] Let's pray. for I, the Lord, do not change.

Therefore, you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. Lord, how good it is to know that you are unchanging.

Yes, you will come in judgment as you promised. Yes, one day all will be called to account. The wicked will be held to account.

And Lord, help us, each of us, in light of your coming judgment, to return to you to fear you, to fling ourselves upon you, so that that day will be a day of great joy, a day when we shall go out leaping like cars from the storm.

So help us to return to you. Help us not to doubt you, your goodness, your generosity, but rather to be a people that love and serve you with gladness, because you are a generous God.

[40 : 55] God, so help us, each of us together, to serve you gladly, to trust you, for you are our God.

Help us in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.