



**“Do I Rob God?”**  
**Sermon – Rod Harding**  
**18 June 2023**

Malachi 3:6-18

2 Corinthians 9:6-11

Mark 12:41-44

Imagine an unexpected email arrives in your inbox – the sender’s email address is <yhwh@heaven.com> and it’s addressed to you. You click it open and the message is headed with the title, ‘Royal Email – as royal as it gets’. You are intrigued – and then you realise it’s from Yahweh, God himself!

It's a short email, with no preamble – ‘Hi [insert your own name] – *You know, I don’t ever change – that’s why you’re still breathing. But ever since I have known your family, you have largely ignored my instructions and have not kept them. So now, return to me and I will return to you.*’ And it’s signed, ‘*The Lord Almighty*’.

What are you going to do? The obvious thing is to reply quickly, because this might be serious. ‘Hi, Lord Almighty,’ you begin – ‘OK, *I admit there’s been a bit of that in my family history – so what do I do? How can I return to you?*’ And you hit ‘Send’.

You don’t wait long – another email comes in from the same address – right over the one you had just sent. ‘*Thanks for getting back to me. Is it possible for a human being, a mere mortal, to rob God? Yet you rob me.*’

How would you respond to that one? ‘What – who – how – me? Robbing you, God? Me? Are you sure? Do I rob God?’

And there it is – the title of today’s sermon on this passage from Malachi 3 – and it’s a good question for each of us to think about as we consider God’s words, through Malachi, to those who have returned to rebuild and reinstate Jerusalem, the temple and the covenant people of God –

*Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, “How are we robbing you?” (v.8).*

As we've already noted, Malachi regularly uses the style of a conversation in his writing. God makes a statement and the people immediately ask how or what or when did we do that – which then gives God the chance to answer.

*“I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you ask, “How have you loved us?” (1:2)*

*It is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, “How have we shown contempt for your name?” (1:6)*

*You have wearied the Lord with your words. “How have we wearied him?” you ask. (2:17)*

And in this case, when the question is, *“How are we robbing you?”*, the answer comes immediately – *“In tithes and offerings.” (v8)*

The folks of Malachi's day probably did not need to ask the next question, but it might be an important one for us as we try to understand how they could be robbing God through tithes and offerings – I would have thought that was how we give to God, not steal from him!

‘Tithe’ is a word which describes one-tenth – 10% – it's a fixed, consistent proportion. The earliest mention of the tithe in the Bible is in Genesis 14, when Abram had just rescued Lot, winning a significant victory and taking the spoils of victory. On his way home, he bumped into Melchizedek, described as King of Salem (Jerusalem) and priest of God Most High. Melchizedek gave Abram a blessing, to which Abram responded by giving Melchizedek *a tenth of everything*. Later, in Genesis 28, Jacob had occasion to make a significant vow to God, which he concluded with the words, *“and of all that you give me I will give you a tenth.” (v.22)*.

The ‘tithe principle’ became an important sign of inclusion in the covenant God made with his people through Moses.

*A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord. Every tithe of the herd and flock – every tenth animal that passes under the shepherd's rod – will be holy to the Lord. (Lev 27:30, 32)*

Right from the earliest times of the nation of Israel, the tithe was like a tax – it was not an option, but an obligation (like ‘parish assessments’ in the Sydney Diocese) – it was always expected as a commitment of belonging to the nation.

The tithe then became the means by which the Levitical assistants to the priests continued to be supported.

*I give to the Levites all the tithes in Israel as their inheritance in return for the work they do while serving at the tent of meeting.*  
(Num 18:21)

But the Levites were also expected to tithe –

*Say to the Levites: “When you receive from the Israelites the tithe I give you as your inheritance, you must present a tenth of that tithe as the Lord’s offering.”* (18:26)

This tithe would be used to support Aaron’s family – the priests.

*From these tithes you must give the Lord’s portion to Aaron the priest.* (18:28)

Once the temple was built, this tithe would be placed in the temple storehouse, for use by the priests as they served.

The tithe was clearly an important part of the social and religious structure of ancient Israel and, as such, was seen as a sign of faithfulness for all who belonged. Failure to maintain the tithe was tantamount to treason – it was a denial of belonging, a serious wrong against the national well-being and failure to take God and his covenant seriously.

On the other hand, ‘offerings’ were voluntary and over and above the tithe. We have heard of burnt offerings, part of the sacrificial system of Israel and the means by which sin, either general or specific, could be forgiven. But there are lots of examples of other offerings – when the tabernacle was being constructed in the wilderness. God’s instructions to Moses were to encourage offerings from the people –

*These are the offerings you are to receive from them: gold, silver and bronze...* (Exodus 25:3)

Again, as their culture and worship became more regularised, and the requirements were made more precise, we read passages like Leviticus 23:37-38 –

*These are the Lord's appointed festivals, which you are to proclaim as sacred assemblies for bringing food offerings to the Lord – the burnt offerings and grain offerings, sacrifices and drink offerings required for each day. These offerings are in addition to those for the Lord's Sabbaths and in addition to your gifts and whatever you have vowed and all the freewill offerings you give to the Lord.'*

By the time both the tithe and the offerings were added together, it is possible that Israelites were expected to provide up to 25% or 30% of their 'income', which was (at least in the early days) more represented by contributions in kind (crops, animals, etc) rather than money. It was always stressed, however, that whatever was being offered, whether the tithe or offerings, it had to be selected from the best of the crop or the flock or herd, rather than using the offerings as a means of getting rid of that which was unusable anyway. Remember back in Malachi 1 –

*“When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” says the Lord Almighty.’ (1:8)*

In spite of their history, the current crowd of Israelites, now focussed on their newly-constructed temple back in Jerusalem around 430BC, have forgotten just how important all this is in terms of their covenant relationship with God! Instead of embracing the old customs (which were built on God's declared purpose and promise for the nation) they have abandoned their trust in and reliance on the Lord and reverted to self-sufficiency as the more comfortable way forward. As we've seen, even where they have remembered the old laws, they have taken shortcuts, held back the best, saved against possible bad times ahead, failed to trust the God of their history – bringing less than the best as their offerings, supporting a priesthood which is no longer trustworthy, intermarrying with local (non-Jewish) women, ignoring the responsibility of

the tithe and generally paying little or no attention to their spiritual condition. Little wonder the emphasis here in this passage is,

*“Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.*  
(v7)

God’s words here are harsh but also hopeful, containing both a curse and a promise of blessing.

*‘You are under a curse ... because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse ... test me in this ... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.’* (v.10)

Continue in the way you are going, and you are under God’s curse, because you are robbing him – but rearrange your priorities, remember the conditions of the covenant and the laws which God has put in place, return to faithfulness in all these important areas and see what God will do!

*“I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe ... all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,”* says the Lord Almighty. (vs11,12)

Yet even as he offers the promise of such blessing, the Lord is aware of the true heart of these people and he calls out their arrogance.

*You have said, “It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty?”* (v14)

These people are determined not to trust God, not to ‘return’ to him, but to further establish their independence from him, claiming their own observations are testimony to their case –

*‘Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.’* (v15)

It is almost as if God himself is giving up on his people and resigning himself to their refusal to realign themselves with him and his purpose for them – they have become arrogant in their resistance, and now find

comfort and hope in ‘getting away with it’. They are just like those who Paul refers to as...

*...enemies of the cross of Christ. Their destiny is destruction, their god is their stomach, and their glory is in their shame. Their mind is set on earthly things. (Phil 3:18-19)*

Their values have become twisted; they have turned away from the promises of God and now refuse to see anything beyond their own worldly observation of the ongoing prosperity of the wicked who continue to oppose God.

The tone of Malachi’s prophecy changes dramatically at this point, as though God somehow has moved into a new and different mind-set. Turning from the dubious character of these rebellious people, he now begins to focus on his own character of absolute faithfulness. The Lord listens to his people who fear him, we read in verse 16, and the names of those who honour him are written in the ‘*scroll of remembrance*’. It is not everyone who stands under the self-chosen curse, for there are still faithful Israelites who will be treated quite differently by their faithful God, who will always be true to his promises to them.

*“On the day when I act,” says the Lord Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession.” (v17)*

This is simply the outcome of where this passage began, when God declared,

*‘I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.’ (v6)*

It is only God’s faithfulness to his covenant, in contrast to the people’s unfaithfulness, which has allowed these people to avoid destruction thus far – God cannot let go his promise to regard his people as ‘*his treasured possession*’. On the day when God acts,

*‘you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.’ (v18)*

There was, there still is, and there always will be a clear distinction between the righteous and the wicked. While many of the details of the ‘rules of engagement’ may well have changed between the

Old Testament and the New, there are some things that will never change – the tithe, in the strict Jewish sense of a one-tenth tax, no longer applies to us, but God himself does not change and everything we have is the result of his goodness and provision for us. Our willingness to trust in that goodness and provision, and to put that trust into action in our lives, is what is required of us. To give generously, not reluctantly or under compulsion, but with a heart of cheerfulness (2 Cor 9), is an expression of our trust that God will always generously provide – not only for us, but also through us, as we respond in open-hearted generosity to situations of commitment or need that we see around us.

Do I rob God? If I can't grasp the truth that God owns all that I have and wants me to share it generously with others and I, therefore, ignore God and hold fast to what I consider my resources for my personal use, then YES! Dare I trust him and so be able to use the resources he has provided with the generosity and freedom enabled by that trust?

In 1896, Judson W. Van de Venter wrote a hymn, which some of us will know – *All to Jesus I surrender, all to him I freely give. I will ever love and trust him, in his presence daily live.* Imagine the chorus went like this – *I surrender 10%, I surrender 10%. All to thee, my blessed Saviour, I surrender 10%.*

But no, the chorus is – *I surrender ALL, I surrender ALL. All to thee, my blessed Saviour, I surrender ALL.* May that be our response today!

### **Malachi 3:6-18**

<sup>6</sup> *“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. <sup>7</sup> Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.*

*“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’*

<sup>8</sup> *“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.*

*“But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’*

*“In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup> You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. <sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. <sup>11</sup> I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the Lord Almighty. <sup>12</sup> “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.*

*<sup>13</sup> “You have spoken arrogantly against me,” says the Lord.*

*“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’*

*<sup>14</sup> “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty? <sup>15</sup> But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.’”*

*<sup>16</sup> Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name.*

*<sup>17</sup> “On the day when I act,” says the Lord Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. <sup>18</sup> And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.*