

**0419            Worship Together – 14 February 2010**

**Stewardship 3 – Malachi 3:6-12 – “Tithing”**

Have you had a good week? I've had a great week  
Sheila and I have been in Cardiff at a conference  
and got to hear Bill Johnson, my hero, several times

He gave some amazing teaching  
he's got the most amazing gift of saying in a single sentence  
something so full of profound meaning  
that it takes you the rest of the day to appreciate it fully

I warn you now - some of what I say today comes from him  
you'll know which bits they are  
they're the good bits

The Bible passage for today is one I've never preached on  
not because it's unimportant  
not because it's untrue  
but because, if I'm honest, I haven't had the courage to do so  
even now, I'm hesitant - so please pray for me

Before I come to it, though, let me ask three questions  
Would you rather live a cursed or a blessed life?  
What would you do if you'd been robbed?  
How trustworthy is God?

Having established  
we'd rather be blessed  
we'd want our stuff back  
God is trustworthy  
let's read the passage

**\*\* READ            Malachi 3:6-12**

Let's go through this ... v6

“I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob are  
not destroyed.”

Has God ever changed? No

Has his word ceased to be true? No

Has his love for us diminished? No

V7        “Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty  
return to the good relationship we had  
return to the promise  
return to the truth of my declarations

Moving on ... this is where the rubber starts to hit the road ...

“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’

Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

In tithes and offerings.”

There are some underlying issues which I want to address

but first there's some what you might call technical stuff to explain

V8 mentions “tithes and offerings” - two different words

A tithe means literally a tenth - it's a specific, fixed amount

offerings is not so specific, not a fixed quantity like the tithe

Offerings and tithes are two different things

one isn't a part of the other

when we consider our giving, we can't lump offering type giving

... in with a part of a tithe to make a whole tithe

they are different things and have different uses in God's eyes

Offerings are extra - over and above a tithe - they're for specific needs

For us, for example, that would like the building fund

or for supporting Levy (the Levy levy)

I want to concentrate on the tithe today - skip to v10 for a moment ...

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse”

Bring the full tenth, or ten percent, into the storehouse

what’s the storehouse

Turn to Neh 13:10-12 (I’m going to be darting around quite a bit)

The situation is this: the Israelites had returned from exile in Babylon

Jerusalem had been destroyed

the temple had been burnt to the ground

Nehemiah had been called by God to restore Jerusalem

and to rebuild the temple

Now, in the final chapter of the book of Nehemiah

... having accomplished all that

Nehemiah put in place some final reforms

“I also learned that the portions assigned to the Levites and singers

responsible for the service had not been given to them, and that all

the Levites and singers had gone back to their own fields. So I

rebuked the officials and asked them, “Why is the house of God

neglected?”Then I called them together and stationed them at their

posts. All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms.”

The tithes were for the Levites and the singers

that is for those ministering in the temple and seeing to its ministry

this included seeing to the needs of the poor

The Levites had no source of income other than that

so when the tithe didn’t come into the storeroom

because it had been neglected

they were forced to work in the fields - away from their calling

There isn’t an exact correspondence with our situation

we don’t usually collect grain, wine and oil in the offering plate

(although Marie did say that in Kenya when she was there

there were chickens in the collection)

The parallel for us is a tithe to the church

so that the ministry God has called us to can be fulfilled

In today’s terms the tithe is to supply the basic resources for this church

to conduct mission and ministry in the area God has given us

For us, the storehouse is the financial resource we can draw on

so if the storehouse hasn’t got what’s needed in it

then the ministry we’re called to is compromised

What does that mean?

First - it means we can’t do what we need to do

we’re letting people down

I listed some of those last week

Here’s another example that occurred to me a few days ago

Does anyone remember a few years back

we had the £100 challenge? ... *explain*

I was describing this to someone from another church

they thought it was a great idea

and it occurred to me - if only we could do this again

but we don’t have the resources

the storehouse hasn’t got enough in it to stretch that far

Second - if the tithe is received, extra pressure is put on those who have given

some have such a heart, they’ll give over and above the tithe

in order to ensure some aspect of ministry is fulfilled

now there’s nothing wrong in that in itself - it’s not resented

but it does mean an extra and unfair burden is placed on them

so that they may not be able to give an offering type gift

For me it’s important the tithe goes to the church, the whole tithe

and isn’t parcelled out to various other bodies and organisations

to other projects important to any particular individual

I believe it's important that if you're a member of this church  
the whole tithe needs to come here  
because I believe in a body ministry and not a divided or part ministry

Thirdly, and I think this is the most important reason  
the perception of God of those on the outside is damaged  
Our character is supposed to reflect his character  
so the way we behave has a profound impact on those on the outside  
that works both ways - for good and for bad, of course

Verse 9, the next verse, is tricky  
tricky because we might get the wrong end of the stick

It speaks of robbing God and of being under a curse  
if we're not careful about this  
we might start to conceive of God as some kind of cosmic loan-shark  
we might let this produce shame and guilt in us  
if so, then I think we've not grasped God's nature properly

To get a better understanding, a more positive understanding  
we have to read on

"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 you will not have  
room enough for it ... then (v12) all the nations will call you blessed for yours  
will be a delightful land."

There's an astonishing promise here  
God will open the floodgates to such an extent  
... that we won't be able to hold it all

God's character, his desire,  
is to share from his abundance  
is to release his abundance on us

Bill Johnson adds, though, that God longs to do this  
but there has to be a choice involved

What it comes down to, I think, is what mind-set we have  
do we have a poverty mind-set or an abundance mind-set

The poverty mind-set takes a defensive posture to life  
and sees this passage as a threat  
this mind-set takes a limited view of God, a limited trust in God  
and because we want to protect what  
we have this leads to limited giving

The abundance mind-set, on the other hand, sees this passage as a promise

And God says "test me in this" - an amazing offer  
God says - examine me in this  
and see what I do - see what blessings I pour out

There are two ways of looking at that promise  
a right way and a wrong way

There is a true story about a man who belonged to a church in Florida  
who was suing his church for \$800

This was because he'd heard the preacher preach on this promise  
and when he didn't get his bonus  
he felt affronted and went after the money he "invested"

That's the wrong way to look at the promise, by the way  
it's just the poverty mind-set at work again

God isn't a slot machine  
and I've said several times, this is a heart issue

What's the right way, the abundance mind-set way?

What's the end game for all this  
the nations will call you blessed (v12)  
the nations will see what it means to believe in the God of Israel  
God's true character will be revealed

They will see that we have a God who blesses us  
they will see that we have a God who blesses others through us  
what happens to God's reputation then ...?

I've got two more Scriptures to look at

Turn to John 7:37 - there's an important spiritual principle here ...  
"Jesus stood and said in a loud voice" ie listen everyone  
"If anyone is thirsty, let him come to me and drink.  
Whoever believes in me, as the Scripture has said,  
streams of living water will flow from within him."

Take a drink of Jesus, imbibe the Spirit,  
and a stream, a river, will flow from us  
it's not meant to be a lake - bottled up  
it's a river, flowing out

Rivers, as Bill Johnson pointed out, have the power to shape the landscape  
we are meant to shape the landscape of our locality, and our town

And now turn to Psalm 67

What does the first verse say? Someone read it out  
"May God be gracious to us and bless us"  
what's he saying - God come and bless us

Is it OK to ask God to bless us?  
Is it acceptable to seek his favour?

Of course it is - it's in the Book!

How much?  
How much do you want to be blessed?  
Which realm would you rather belong to?  
The realm of cursing or blessing?  
I know which I want  
It's not wrong to ask for blessing

I don't know how God will release his favour  
None of us can predict how he'll do that  
it might be financial favour  
it might be something else  
I've heard enough stories now to know that what he does  
... is usually a surprise

And verse two  
"That your ways may be known on earth,  
your salvation among all nations"

Why cry out for God's favour?  
For ourselves - in part, yes,  
but mainly so others can come to know that Jesus is the life-giver  
so other feel the river flowing out of us onto them  
so they can say - who is this God of yours  
can I meet him?

Would someone read the rest of the psalm ...  
"God will bless us, and all the ends of the earth will fear him"

Do you get the idea?  
Do you follow the logic of heaven?

Why tithe?  
Because our desire is to fill the storehouse

Why do we desire to fill the storehouse?  
to foster an atmosphere of blessing  
... so heaven's storehouse is opened to us

Why do that?  
So we get to partner with God in releasing more mission and ministry  
so we get to be a source of extravagant blessing to others

And why do that?  
To bring God's kingdom in

We want more and more people apprehended by God's love  
we want to win them

By avoiding the poverty mind-set,  
and by embracing the abundance mind-set of heaven  
instead of experiencing the vicious circle of deprivation  
we experience the virtuous circle of blessing

God has chosen to allow us the privilege to work  
for the redemption of the world  
there's joy in serving and there's joy in giving

OK - Let's get practical

How should we respond to this passage?  
I have to admit it's tricky

The simplest case is what I've done  
that is, to take my monthly income and Sheila's  
add them together and move the decimal point left one place  
and make out a standing order to that amount  
that's the way I prefer - it's neat  
it's a simple fire and forget approach

Actually, when I did that a week or two back,  
I found I hadn't quite kept up  
I needed to adjust upwards slightly

That just goes to show how easy it is to get a bit slack and fall short  
so try to avoid that

Now is when it gets more complicated  
for a number of reasons

For some of us, our income doesn't come in as a fixed quantity each month  
it's not that predictable - it goes up and down

It requires a bit more diligence,  
but a tithe can be worked out each week or month as it comes in  
if you're in this boat, it does make it difficult to fill in the pledge form

We have asked, in the stewardship packs you should have received,  
to complete a pledge form - to say how much you intend to give

The pledge forms are useful to Charles, our Treasurer,  
because they give him some idea of how to work out a budget

My suggestion is to tithe as you go  
and to fill in the pledge as a best guess average of some kind  
if things change drastically, just let Charles know  
it won't matter

For many of us, we feel we'd like to give more  
but feel prevented from doing so  
it might be that you've got limited means  
... you're border-line already  
or it might be that there's no work at the moment  
or that with interest rates so low, your income has dropped

It could be that you're supporting a family member in some way

For some, it could be a debt problem  
and in servicing that debt in a godly way may mean  
there's little that disposable for living - let alone giving

It's impossible to lay down a one-size fits all solution  
and I wouldn't want to

All I can say is that Malachi presents us with a Biblical norm - tithing  
and he presents us with a mind-blowing promise of blessing

What I'm asking for is a prayerful response to the stewardship request  
pray about it  
and as you pray hold this passage before you, press into it

Remember this is a heart issue  
ask the Lord for an abundance mind-set  
one which seeks to unlock and draw on the resources of heaven  
one which seeks to honour him

If our heart is right  
I believe he will enable us to do the right thing  
and he will deliver on his promise

We're half way through the sermons now  
that may be cause for a small celebration, I don't know

It may be near the time to start thinking about putting pen to paper  
deciding how you're going to reply to the stewardship request  
there are, I understand, one or two responses in early

There's still plenty of time  
time for prayer and reflection  
but I do ask that you get the completed forms in

I'd like to conclude with a few more thoughts

As I looked through various OT passages which referred to tithing  
I notices that in two cases  
the one already mentioned in Nehemiah 13  
and one in 2 Chronicles 31  
that a move towards generosity and in giving a full tithe  
was associated with a time of great spiritual renewal

God's people experienced revival at the same time  
as their hearts were inclined to generous giving and the tithe

This is what I've been trying to say with the two junctions analogy  
that we have two related choices  
to choose living and to choose giving  
living for God wholeheartedly  
giving to God wholeheartedly

Our giving has to match our calling  
we can't have one without the other  
or instead of moving forward with God  
we'll find ourselves doing a U-turn and going backwards

The second thing I'd like to share is a kind of vision of how things might be  
this comes from you know who last week

Bill offered a couple of examples from his church  
how the overflow of the heart  
how that river - can shape the landscape

Eating out in restaurants is quite popular over there  
and many members of his church have adopted the practice  
of tipping extravagantly - sometimes more than the cost of the meal  
for poorly paid waiters and waitresses that means a great deal

Some have even been paying for the meals at an adjacent table  
give me their bill - this is on me or on us

Apparently this has caught on  
people who don't go to their church, non-believers,  
have been copying that  
isn't that interesting

The atmosphere in the town has shifted a little  
these are examples of the abundance mind-set at work  
a stream of living water has shaped the landscape

The church's reputation has built up over the years  
so much so that those in charge of running the town  
have approached them to help with financing some projects  
because of the recession, they can't accomplish what they need to  
so they've asked Bethel church to help  
and they've done just that  
making a contribution to assist the local council's (?) programmes  
and giving it without a fanfare of trumpets, too

I don't know how much they gave  
but imagine how much favour the church has  
imagine how much God's reputation has risen  
... with the powers that be

When I heard these things, I went WOW  
could we ever do that?

Could we have influence in restaurants?  
Could we make a significant impact on our town?

I believe if we turn our hearts to God  
if we learn to be joyful in our giving, in our tithing  
if we learn how to pass on, how to recycle, blessings  
we could make a significant difference  
and God would get the glory

No U-turns, then  
live for the Lord  
give to the Lord in tithes and offerings!