

Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation

The importance of affirming God's Worthiness to Be Honored by Our Gifts

Intro: This is our sixth lesson on Malachi and we have been seen that God speaks to Israel through Malachi during a time of spiritual stagnation and malaise.

In the first dialogue we see that Israel had lost their sense of God's love and thus began to question their special relationship to God.

In the second dialogue we saw that priests had lost their sense of God's greatness and the sense of privilege they had in serving in God's house and in being His messengers to the people.

In the third dialogue we see that the Israelite men had lost sight of God's purpose for a holy people and had divorced their wives and married idolatrous women.

In the fourth dialogue we see that the people had lost faith in the justice of God and thus questioned the benefit of serving Him.

Each of these conditions resulted in dishonor to God in speech, worship, and lifestyle.

Now let's listen in on the fifth dialogue (3:7-12)

The fifth dialogue (addressed to all Israel)

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 a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?' In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you! Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the Lord of hosts. And all the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts. (Mal. 3:7-12)

Thinking through the conversation

This time God's message is addressed once more to the whole nation. It begins with a blanket charge and plea:

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

In contrast to God's unchanging longsuffering and mercy, the Israelites had often live in disobedience to God. It was a deliberate act on their part. Yet God has once more graciously offered the opportunity for repentance in keeping with His covenant promises (Deut. 4:30-31).

The solution is simple:

Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts.
And Israel once more questions how they could have done what the Lord suggests:

"But you say, 'How shall we return?'

Again and again we see that Israel spiritual malaise and stagnation has blinded them to their failings and shortcomings. They are clueless as to how they departed from the Lord. Therefore they do not know how to "return" to Him.

Once more God answers:

"Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me!

The Hebrew word "kava" means "to take by force." Ironically it is as if the omnipotent God is overpowered by mere men. Of course, it is the result of the freedom God has given them to obey or disobey Him.

And the people respond once more in typical fashion:

But you say, 'How have we robbed Thee?'

At every point, there is apparent doubt about the charges God has made. Malachi's contemporaries are thinking, "What have we stolen from God? Is not every furnishing of the temple still there?"

God explains how Israel has robbed Him

In tithes and offerings

The first term "ma'asah" refers to the tithes brought to the temple. This tithe was used for the support of the Levites and the priests.

Under the Mosaic Law, the Israelites were required to give a tenth of all produce and livestock to the Lord (or they could redeem it with money and add a fifth part). See Lev. 27:30-33.

The second term "terumah" refers to the heave offerings that were given to the priests as an acknowledgement of God's blessing.

An additional tithe was to be brought to the temple and eaten with the priests as an act of fellowship with God and His temple servants (Deut.12:5-18).

Each third year the tithe was shared with the priests, orphans, and widows in their cities (Deut. 14:27-29).

The tithes were in addition to numerous sacrificial offerings, and were an acknowledgment that everything belonged to God and that He was the giver of all possessions. (BBC)

Clearly God by law required a significant portion of the nation's income be devoted to Him as the source of all their blessings.

Moreover God shows that their "robbery" has affected their material prosperity.

You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you!

That curse was predicted by God in Deut 28:

You shall bring out much seed to the field but you shall gather in little, for the locust shall consume it. You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you shall neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm shall devour them. You shall have olive trees throughout your territory but you shall not anoint yourself with the oil, for your olives shall drop off. (Deut.28:38-40)

When Israel "robbed God" they were actually robbing themselves!

However there is hope if they will change their ways!

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this," says the Lord of hosts, "if I will not open for you the windows of heaven, and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows. Then I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it may not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes," says the Lord of hosts. And all the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land," says the Lord of hosts. (Mal. 3:7-12)

These promises were a fulfillment of the covenant blessings that God the Israelites proclaim at Mount Gerizim and Ebal.

And so we can see that many of Israel's complaints about God's justice and goodness might have been rooted in their belief that He was not blessing them as they expected. Yet God reveals that He could not bless them because they had failed to honor Him by withholding their offerings. Their spiritual stagnation and malaise was the direct result of their disobedience to the Lord.

Learning from the conversation

First it is important to recognize one of the substantial differences between the covenants.

The reward for faithful tithing in the OT was material wealth. It was a part of the covenant God made with Israel as they lived in the land as a separate nation, distinct from the nations of the world.

The new covenant made with people from all nations offers no such material rewards per se as part of the covenant. The reward for faithful stewardship in the present age is spiritual riches.

So we should reject the message of the modern health and wealth televangelists who pound the pulpits with the idea that generous giving will automatically produce an abundance of wealth.

Second we should not allow the first point to convince us that God holds us to a lesser standard.

Many people appear to find it a great relief that God has given no requirement of tithing in the new covenant; but we would be greatly mistaken to conclude that God is perfectly happy with the person who devotes only a small fraction of his income to the Lord's work.

If anything we have more reasons to be generous toward God. The NT measures our giving not by law, but by grace, the favor that we have in our hearts toward God for His great love and sacrifice for us.

A couple of quotes from commentaries:

The NT teaches believers to give systematically, liberally, cheerfully, and as the Lord has prospered them, that is, proportionately. But no mention is made of tithing. Rather, the suggestion is that if a Jew living under law gave a tenth, how much more should a Christian living under grace give! The N.T. pattern for giving is characterized by freedom (2 Cor. 9:6, 7) and responsible planning (1 Cor. 16:2). But freedom does not negate the validity of the tithe, since tithing is the natural and basic expression of stewardship. Jesus demands more in terms of stewardship than merely the precise compliance with the tithe, but He sanctions at least the practice of tithing (Matt. 23:23; cf. Luke 11:42). Though stewardship may include more than the tithe, it is never less than the tithe. (BSB)

Third it is helpful to remember that failure to give what is due Him is robbery in His eyes.

Obligations to give abound in Scripture. "Doing good and sharing" are considered the "sacrifices with which God is well pleased." (Heb. 13:16).

Paul commends the church at Philippi for their generosity in being partners with him in the gospel:

But I have received everything in full, and have an abundance; I am amply supplied, having received from Epaphroditus what you have sent, a fragrant aroma, an acceptable sacrifice, well-pleasing to God. (Phil. 4:18)

Conclusion: If we are to meet the challenges of spiritual stagnation, we must not only keep affirming God's love for us, reflecting upon His greatness and the privilege of serving Him, but also recognizing that we possess the instruction of our great king and we possess the sacred duty to share His word with others. We must recognize His desire to preserve a holy people and do what we can to protect our faith against the erosion of unbelief. We must affirm His justice, even when the world doesn't seem fair. And we must give Him his due in our contributions.