

Robbing God

7 Yet from the days of your fathers You have gone away from My ordinances And have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," Says the LORD of hosts. "But you said, 'In what way shall we return?' 8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation. 10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try 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 such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it. 11 "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field," Says the LORD of hosts; 12 "And all nations will call you blessed, For you will be a delightful land," Says the LORD of hosts.

An article appeared in Times Live in September last year entitled “Missionaries of Money on the March Across Africa.” In it, the writer describes how churches that preach a message of financial prosperity are slowly taking over. The richest pastor in Nigeria own four private jets, several properties in the U.S. And U.K. I spoke with a man who attends one of the largest of these, who told me of the unimaginable lavish and decadent lifestyles of the so-called pastors of these churches.

I remember speaking with a man who told me that because so many of the people he preached to had come out of the prosperity and health and wealth churches, that he never taught on giving. He said, “They've just heard so much nonsense on money, that I just don't even approach the subject.” At the time, I thought that was kind of commendable – put such a distance between yourself and false teachers that no one can begin to mistake you for them.

And I confess that when I began my ministry, I did much of the same. I was even proud of myself for doing so. But the longer I went along, the more problems I saw with that approach. First, as a preacher, my calling is to preach God's Word – all of it. If God teaches on giving and on finances, I don't have the authority to edit out those parts simply because I don't want to be associated with false teachers. That's actually self-serving, instead of being sacrificial. If the prevalence of false teaching controls what we do and don't teach, we are actually letting the false teachers control our pulpits. False teachers shouldn't set the agenda for what we preach-- God sets the agenda. Second, by not teaching God's people the truth about giving, I was hindering Christians from maturing and thriving and growing in a very necessary part of Christian discipleship. Instead of countering the false teaching about giving with true teaching about giving, my silence probably lead people to either believe the false prophets or neglect giving altogether. God's people miss out. I found a third, strange consequence. When people don't learn about generous giving from God's Word, things don't stand still as far as our attitudes towards money and giving goes. I have found that in some, a strange kind of sensitivity and suspiciousness about money creeps, even in attitudes towards spending God's money on God's work. You can talk about money too much, and people get hardened and callous to it. But you can also talk about it too little, and people actually become oversensitive and touchy about it.

But faithful heralds of God's Word are simply going to report what God says. Malachi was one such faithful prophet. He didn't shrink back from giving Israel the messages he heard from God. At a time of real spiritual backsliding, Malachi dealt with Israel regarding their sloppy and defective worship, their hypocritical leaders, their treachery in marriage, and their cynicism about God's justice. And then He reported to them this area of their lives that had also been affected by their spiritual lethargy – their giving.

Here is a passage sorely abused by the prosperity teachers. It is one of their favourite texts. So what shall we do? Be quiet on it? Avoid it? No, as we have gone verse by verse through this book, as we

now come to it, let us hear what God says on this matter and put error to flight with truth.

Because this is an Old Testament passage delivered to Israel there will be differences to us as the New Testament church, but there will also be similarities. Israel's failures in this area can be just like ours. And God's promises to Israel for faithful giving still have applications for us today. So let's use this passage to set the record straight from the false teachers. Let's understand what giving is supposed to be, what God does require, and what God promises.

I. The Hardness That Brought Leanness

7 Yet from the days of your fathers You have gone away from My ordinances And have not kept them. Return to Me, and I will return to you," Says the LORD of hosts. "But you said, 'In what way shall we return?' 8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings. 9 You are cursed with a curse, For you have robbed Me, Even this whole nation.

Israel has been disobeying God. God calls for repentance, for returning. And once again, you have this hard-hearted people saying, "In what way?" "In what area have we gone away from God that we need to repent of?"

God's reply is strong. "Can a man seriously think of stealing from God. You have robbed me!" Without missing a beat, comes the impertinent response, "In what way have we robbed You?" God says, "In your tithes and offerings. You have not been bringing what I called for. You had an obligation and you have not kept it. You owe, and you do not pay. And so you are cursed with a curse."

So let's step back a little and understand what God exactly means here. How could God speak to Israel as if they owed Him money?

Well, remember, Israel was a nation in covenant with God. At Mount Sinai, they accepted the covenant God made with them, by saying, "*Then all the people answered together and said, 'All that the LORD has spoken we will do.'*" (Exo 19:8)

Once they accepted that obligation, they accepted the giving obligations under the Law. And this is what they were: In Leviticus 27:30-33, every Israelite had to bring a tenth of his land's produce or his income to pay for the Levites. The Levites really functioned like a kind of civil government, so it was almost a form of income tax. On top of that, Israelites had to pay a second annual tithe to fund the religious festivals, prescribed in Deuteronomy 14:22-27. Every third year, there was a third tithe, to be used for the poor, and for the Levites (Deut 14:28-29). They also had to pay a half a shekel for the maintenance of the Tabernacle, and later the Temple. So put together, the Israelite was obligated to pay around 25-27% of his income to the nation of Israel.

We can say this was Israel's *required* giving. These amounts were not acts of free will offerings, they were Israel's legal obligations under the Mosaic covenant.

Now the word "rob" is very suitable for a debt, but it is not suitable for a gift. I don't talk about people robbing me if they don't bring me Christmas presents. I talk about a man robbing me if he owes me money according to a contract.

Now God also encouraged Israel to bring a second kind of offering: offerings that were free-will offerings, offerings of devotion, of gratitude, of thankfulness. Once they had their obligation out the way, God wanted the Israelites to enjoy His blessing, celebrate it with generosity, out of which would come more blessing. 17 *"Every man shall give as he is able, according to the blessing of the*

LORD your God which He has given you. (Deu 16:17)

Now because of Israel's idolatry, they had another burden. They had to pay tax to the nations or empires that ruled them. In the time of Malachi, it was the Persians that Israel had to pay tax to.

And here in the time of Malachi, God could say to Israel, not only have your free-will offerings stopped, you have stopped giving tithes, your obligations. You have failed to keep the covenant we made. Each year that you do not bring in the two tithes, and the Temple tax, and the tri-annual tithe, you are keeping for yourself what I have required.

Now when Israel failed to keep their obligations, it was plain disobedience. It was the same kind of rebellion that led them to all the other sins we have seen in this book. And for that failure to obey, there were curses. God had promised Israel in Deuteronomy 28 and 29 that there were blessings for obeying the Mosaic covenant, and curses for disobeying the Mosaic covenant. One of the curses would be financial leanness – agricultural famine, drought, general poverty. God says to Israel that is what is happening to you. You have hit lean times because of your own disobedience.

But when Israel failed to give free-will offerings, it was a failure of love. When Israel could not go beyond the obligation, and celebrate God's generosity to them with token generosity of their own, what had dried up was joy in God. Here there was not merely a leanness financially, but a leanness of soul.

Just like their failure to be in awe of God led them to give Him leftovers, to marry unbelievers, to doubt His love, so their failure to be in awe of Him led them to see giving as a grind, and in the end as a burden to be shunned altogether.

Israel's view of God showed up in their giving. If you view God as stingy, a hard taskmaster, a promise-breaker, unreliable, it shows up in giving. If you take your eyes off God, and allow covetousness to grow, which Colossians 3:5 says is idolatry, you resent God for touching your other god. Our view of God comes out in our giving, for where our treasure is, there our heart will be also. Their hardness brought leanness.

Now how does this apply to the New Testament church? Well, did we make a covenant with God at Mount Sinai? No. Does God require His New Testament people to bring two tithes, a third annual tithe and support a Temple? No. You can search the New Testament and you will not find the Lord Jesus or any apostle commanding the church that a required percentage of income must be given annually. When looking for continuity from the Old into the New, we look for repeated prescriptions, and lacking them, we cannot argue from silence that God requires believers to give 27,5% to the church annually.

Furthermore, we cannot take this passage which promises the curses of Deuteronomy 29 upon the land, and use it to scare people, and say – you will be poor and cursed if you do not tithe.

Those are the differences. But there are similarities. Look at a New Testament passage which describes giving for the church.

5 Therefore I thought it necessary to exhort the brethren to go to you ahead of time, and prepare your generous gift beforehand, which you had previously promised, that it may be ready as a matter of generosity and not as a grudging obligation. 6 But this I say: He who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and he who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. 7 So let each one give as he purposes in his heart, not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver. (2Co 9:5-7)

What does that sound like, like an obligation under the Law, or like a free-will offering under grace? It is a free-will offering. Notice how we are to give according to verse 6-7.

Sacrificially. If you sow sparingly, with just a few seeds, your harvest will be in keeping with that. So the offering is something that demonstrates the value and the cost of the One we are giving to. Paul illustrates this earlier with the Macedonians.

2 Corinthians 8:1 Moreover, brethren, we make known to you the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia: 2 that in a great trial of affliction the abundance of their joy and their deep poverty abounded in the riches of their liberality. 3 For I bear witness that according to their ability, yes, and beyond their ability, they were freely willing, 4 imploring us with much urgency that we would receive¹ the gift and the fellowship of the ministering to the saints. (2Co 8:1-4)

These people were in dire need themselves, but went beyond themselves in their giving. Such was their desire, that it overflowed into a sacrificial offering.

Purposefully. The giving is planned, not accidental. When a man purposes in his heart to give, he does not give what happens to be in his wallet on Sunday. He builds it into his budget like anything else. It's between him and God, and no one else has to know, but it's thought out and planned. And here's where the whole idea of percentages comes in. A purposeful amount will usually be controlled by some kind of percentage of income. Now for many Christians, 10% has been the percentile. And if you use that, that's fine. But beware of something. Beware that 10% doesn't become a kind of obligation, where if you feel you have paid that, then you have paid God and that burden is taken care of. A free-will offering may well be 10%, but it could be less, and it could be much more. But the idea is that we think of our giving in terms of how God has prospered us. 2 *On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come.* (1Co 16:2)

12 *For if there is first a willing mind, it is accepted according to what one has, and not according to what he does not have.* (2Co 8:12)

Cheerfully. not grudgingly or of necessity; for God loves a cheerful giver Paul says, don't give out of guilt, out of obligation, out of deep reluctance. Give because you want to. Give gladly. Give happily. Give with the kind of rejoicing and thanksgiving that goes with the free-will offering. New Testament giving is voluntary and cheerful.

The implication is, don't give if you don't want to. Someone says, you mean I don't have to give if I don't want to? Correct. But here's the catch: it's a sin to not want to. Don't give if you don't want to, but if you don't want to, you've already disobeyed God, because God commands you to love Him and enjoy Him and cheerfully echo back to Him His generosity to you.

You see, under the Law you had compulsory giving and voluntary. In the New Testament it changes: all giving is compulsory and all giving is voluntary. How? God says, you must give, but you must give voluntarily. If you don't give cheerfully, don't give, but it's a sin to not have that cheerfulness. So what is God doing? Like everything in the New Testament, He is driving the external inward. He is saying, when you don't want to, repent and confess that and ask Me to give you a cheerful heart, so that you will want to want to.

Furthermore, just because Christians are to give voluntarily does not mean a church does not have financial obligations. We do. We have to support missionaries. Churches are commanded to financially support those who labour in preaching and teaching. We are to help those in genuine need without other means of support.

It's simply that in New Testament giving, we are compelled to give by grace, by love for Christ, by

joy in Him. We bring free will offerings that are sacrificial, planned, and given gladly.

Does the negative side here have an application for the church? Well, we can't apply the curses of the Mosaic covenant in a one for one way to a New Testament Christian. But I will say this, if you refuse to submit to God and get a cheerful heart about this, then you can expect leanness of soul. You can expect a narrowness of vision of God to come upon you as you refuse to live out the Gospel of John 3:16 kind of graciousness. And it may well be that God can chasten a disobedient believer with material leanness too. One preacher said to a couple who said that their finances were too tight to give anything to God, "If you are having financial difficulties, you can not afford not to give."

But like every rebuke in this book, it is met with a promise of grace. God reveals something glorious about Himself which is the antidote to their hardness and stinginess and apathy.

II. The Generosity That Brings Abundance

10 Bring all the tithes into the storehouse, That there may be food in My house, And try 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 such blessing That there will not be room enough to receive it. 11 "And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes, So that he will not destroy the fruit of your ground, Nor shall the vine fail to bear fruit for you in the field," Says the LORD of hosts; 12 "And all nations will call you blessed, For you will be a delightful land," Says the LORD of hosts.

God tells Israel to bring their required tithes to the Temple, and put God to the test. God, in amazing grace says to Israel, if you simply obey what we agreed to in the covenant, I will outgive your giving. I will bless you with more than you can possibly hold. I will keep back the locusts and the insects. I will make sure your crops produce. You will be so fruitful that nations around you will notice and call you blessed.

Israel was battling with stinginess, and amazingly God deals with stinginess with His own generosity. Step out in faith, God says, and you will see what kind of God asked for these things in the first place.

You see, any Israelite who had read his own Scriptures would know that God did not need their offerings. Look at Psalm 50.

7 "Hear, O My people, and I will speak, O Israel, and I will testify against you; I am God, your God! 8 I will not rebuke you for your sacrifices Or your burnt offerings, Which are continually before Me. 9 I will not take a bull from your house, Nor goats out of your folds. 10 For every beast of the forest is Mine, And the cattle on a thousand hills. 11 I know all the birds of the mountains, And the wild beasts of the field are Mine. 12 "If I were hungry, I would not tell you; For the world is Mine, and all its fullness. 13 Will I eat the flesh of bulls, Or drink the blood of goats? 14 Offer to God thanksgiving, And pay your vows to the Most High. (Psa 50:7-14)

What is God saying to Israel here? I don't need the offerings you bring. They don't enrich Me in any way. I am not fuller or richer or better off once you bring them. I own them, I made them. I supply you with the stuff you give Me! You don't give to make Me better off. I am never your beneficiary. I am always the benefactor! So what does God want from Israel? Verse 14 – thanksgiving. He wants their heart. He wants the heart rejoicing in God's generosity with its own generosity.

How we need to know this truth. Giving to God is not to keep Him happy. It is not a good luck charm over our businesses and homes. It is not a divine lottery ticket that will help us to win big. It is not an insurance policy to keep bad things from happening to us. It is not a seed offering that will

multiply our money tenfold as if God is operating a pyramid scheme. We give to God because in doing so, we come to know His heart. In giving to God we actually come to know how generous He is. We give to God, and realise the absurdity of giving to the One who made all and owns all. But we do so because in surrendering our hold on our money, we tangibly say to God and ourselves - "It's yours. You own it. You have outgiven Me, outblessed Me and I will always be in your debt. Take this, as just a symbol, a regular, ongoing symbol that I love you, I depend on You, You are my source. That's why Paul ends His section on giving in 2 Corinthians 9 with this glorious verse:

15 Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift! (2Co 9:15)

That's at the heart of the New Testament giving. John 3:16 is at the heart of New Testament giving. Giving is God's escape hatch from the prison of covetousness. Giving is God's sedative blowdart into the leopard of materialism and loving money. It's a favour God does us to free us from the monkey-trap of stinginess and hoarding. It's God coming into the dark and musty room of our selfish hearts, and opening the windows and the curtains and letting the fresh air of His Gospel generosity flood our souls.

Spurgeon said, "All the rivers run into the sea, the sea feeds the clouds, the clouds empty out their treasures, the earth gives back the rain in fertility and so it is an endless chain of giving generosity! Generosity reigns supreme in Nature! There is nothing in this world but lives by giving except a covetous man, and such a man is a piece of grit in the machinery. He is out of gear with the universe. Man is a wheel running in the opposite direction to the wheels of God's great engine. He is a jibbing horse in the team. He is one that will not do what all the forces of the world are doing. He is a monster! He is not fit for this world at all! He has not realized the motion of the spheres. He keeps not step with the march of the ages. He is out of date. He is out of place. He is out of God's order altogether. But the cheerful giver is marching to the music of the spheres. He is in order with God's great natural laws and God, therefore, loves him, since He sees His own work in him."

Israel brought its offerings to the Temple. Where do we bring ours? Well, in 1 Corinthians 16, Paul says our giving needs to centre on our local church.

1 Corinthians 16:1 Now concerning the collection for the saints, as I have given orders to the churches of Galatia, so you must do also: 2 On the first day of the week let each one of you lay something aside, storing up as he may prosper, that there be no collections when I come. (1Co 16:1-2)

Nothing wrong with Christians supporting charitable causes, but Paul here suggests that we prepare our free-will offerings and bring them on the Lord's Day – the first day of the week – to our church. There are plenty of charitable causes we could give to. But since I became a Christian, I have centred my giving on whatever local church I was a part of. Who will support Operation Hunger and The Polar Bear fund? Let the dead bury their dead, but you and I are to follow Christ. Our priorities are with His church. Unbelievers will be a part of many of those causes, but who will support the spread of the Gospel and the preaching of His Word?

So can the New Testament church take these promises of blessing given to Israel? Can we say that if we give to God, He will open the windows of Heaven, and pour out blessing, and rebuke the devourer, and nations will call us blessed?

The answer is, yes, as long as you realise that we are not a nation with a land. We are a pilgrim people, so the way God will bless us will not be in exactly the same way. However, what the New Testament makes abundantly clear is that God will provide and materially and spiritually bless the giving of His people.

"Give, and it will be given to you: good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over will be put into your bosom. For with the same measure that you use, it will be measured back to you." (Luk 6:38)

And God is able to make all grace abound toward you, that you, always having all sufficiency in all things, may have an abundance for every good work. (2Co 9:8)

And my God shall supply all your need according to His riches in glory by Christ Jesus. (Phi 4:19)

That is not a blanket promise of financial abundance for every believer who gives. It is a promise that generous people will experience generosity. It is a promise that when you pour yourself out in God's service, He will supply every genuine need to make it happen. It is a promise that when you seek to meet needs, God will meet yours.

The principle of Malachi spoken to Israel does hold true for us. Love God in giving, and watch how God will show Himself strong to you. Love God in generosity, and you will find out if God is generous. Work for Him and see if the bag of seed that you are scattering ever empties completely.

Some Christians are economic Darwinists. In Darwinism, the natural world follows natural laws and mechanisms which are a closed system of determined cause and effect, which explains all life. A lot of Christians think of money and economics like that: that the economy is this closed, humanly devised system of supply and demand, goods and services, profit and loss, and that certain acts bring certain results, and God has nothing to do with it. God is outside the system.

Now while God commends sound financial sense, and there certainly are economic principles that benefit both believer and unbeliever, God continually reminds His people that He is as much present and active and Lord of our financial lives as He is over the sun and moon. You can't ignore God's principles and think it will work simply because Wits Business School or the Wall Street Journal isn't teaching about grace-giving.

We don't battle the false teaching of the prosperity Gospel by not giving, by not teaching on giving. We battle it by showing the beauty and glory of the Gospel in our giving – how it releases God-centred generosity in us, how it releases us from loving money, how displays that our treasure is God Himself.