

How are we serving God? Whole or half heartedly? Are we giving God the respect and honour he deserves? Are we doubting God's love for us?

What happens if you begin to doubt God's love? Well you begin to think he's untrustworthy. And that's not just a spiritual problem, that's a problem that begins to upset your whole life.

This is the issue that was facing the Israelites in Malachi's day. They doubted God's love; they'd stopped giving him the honour and respect he deserved. This impacted their whole lives. This doubt affected their sacrifices. They gave God diseased, disabled animals whereas he deserved the best of their flocks. They were half-hearted towards God. Also, they were unfaithful, we've seen that in their attitude to their family lives. They were divorcing for any old reason and marrying non-believers. Basically they were a mess.

Now, in the 5th section of Malachi, we're going to see how their rejection of God affected their wallets. They robbed God. They thought God was withholding blessings from them so they were withholding money from him. Their spiritual doubts were shown in material ways.

Of course that's the same today. Having doubts about God's faithfulness always affects us in material ways. Our actions are affected by disbelief. Right belief results in right action – wrong belief results in wrong actions. If we doubt God's blessing, if we think God is withholding blessings from us, it will result in us withholding things from him. Our heart attitude to money is a direct reflection of our spiritual attitude to God. Our finances are an MRI scan of our hearts.

Some of us here are maybe going through a time when we feel God is distant, maybe our spiritual fervour has cooled off. God isn't the focus he used to be. To any of us like that, God is very clear, 'Return to me'. For others, it may be that you've never claimed to be a Christian. Well God says a similar thing to you. 'Come to me for the very 1st time, I am faithful, trustworthy and generous. I'll give you life forever in my kingdom. I made you, return to me!'

1. The issue – Rejecting God's word (6-7a)

In the original Hebrew there is a play on words, this verse and a half are saying, God doesn't change – the people don't change. God doesn't change in faithfulness: the people don't change in unfaithfulness. **Malachi 3:6** "I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷ Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them."

Throughout the history of Israel God has always remained faithful to his people and his promises. This is the repeated theme throughout Malachi. God is the same yesterday, today and forever. God is God and he doesn't change.

On the flip side the people don't change. The people have repeatedly turned away from God and his decrees. The history of Israel is an ongoing cycle of being saved by God, then rejecting God. In the desert, during the exodus with Moses, they rejected God and his promises. Then again they rejected God once they'd entered the Promised Land in the time of the judges. Then again after the reign of Solomon. Then again, then again, then again. Throughout the history of Israel the people had repeatedly been unfaithful to God.

We mustn't look at them and think how awful. We need to hear this and reflect on ourselves. When are we tempted to do the same? When do we doubt God's word? When do we just go through the motions of religious duty? When are we half-hearted towards God? Maybe we think that because Jesus came 2,000 years ago, he's forgotten a bit about us. We don't really believe his promise that he will return. We doubt that God's in charge. We doubt the future that's been promised to us. We doubt God's word.

Does that describe you? Are you struggling to keep going as a Christian? Are you struggling to keep your head above water, let alone think about how to apply God's word to your life? Do God's promise of blessing and salvation seem a bit abstract and remote? Emotionally do you think your Christian life is flat and unemotional? Maybe you used to feel God's presence, get excited with God's word. But now it's all a bit of a chore and hard work. Are we turning away from God's word?

Well if that in anyway describes you, then just pause and reflect on the first 6 words of this passage. "I the LORD do not change." God isn't remote, or distant. God hasn't forgotten us. Even though we may have turned away from his word, God remains faithful to his promises. Malachi has taught us that God loves us, he's chosen us, he's purified us. And, even though we may have wandered away from Him, he wants us back.

Wonderfully God doesn't change. So his people, the descendants of Jacob are not destroyed. Because of their attitude to God they deserved to be cut off from God. They deserved God to punish them and to stop being his chosen people. But God made promises 1,500 years before

Malachi that they would be his people and they would bring blessing to all nations. God doesn't change, he keeps his promises.

If we've turned away from God's word God offers the solution to our problems. It's very simple, but incredible powerful.

2. The solution – Return to God (7b)

Malachi 3:7 Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' The solution is very simple – return to God. And the result of doing that is that he'll return to you.

Our motive to return is wrapped up in who God is and what he's done. God's faithful, God's awesome, God's saviour, God is Lord. Because of who God is we should want to return to him. But even more than that, because of what he's done we can return to him. We saw last week that God would come to his people to purify them, to make them acceptable. The reason we can return to God is precisely because of what Jesus did when he came to earth.

If we've been half-hearted towards God, I think we can struggle to see how to return to God. Sometimes we might feel we've gone too far away and God wouldn't want us back. Or perhaps we feel that it's simply not worth the effort. But, no-one is too far away from God, no-one is beyond His reach to be saved. Jesus' death on the cross was enough to pay for each and every one of your sins. Trust what God says and return to Him.

But, look at verse 7, the people ask, "How are we to return?" They don't get how to do that, they doubt they can return, they doubt God's ability to bring them back. So, God gives them one clear, practical, area of their life so they can return. Their attitude to money. This is the key area because our attitude to our material possessions reflects our attitude to God. Our finances are an MRI scan of the heart.

3. The solution – Don't rob God (8-10a)

How do they return to God? It's not an airy fairy, super spiritual solution. It's a practical, solid, visible action that displays their attitude to God. Verse 8; "Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' "In tithes and offerings. ⁹You are under a curse-- your whole nation-- because you are robbing me."

They're robbing God. The word for rob here isn't so much to steal, it's more like to commit armed robbery against someone. It's a violent form of robbery. This is what they were doing to God. God was their God, they were his people, and here they are committing armed robbery against him. That's like you going round to your parent's house with a shotgun and robbing them. That's shocking!

They were withholding what should have been given to God. Their attitude to God was reflected in their attitude to money. What was the solution? Simple; look at verse 10, bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in God's house. Give to God all that you should in response to all that he's done for you.

Now we need to be careful how we apply this to us today. We can't directly apply what God says here to us today. God wouldn't say to us that we've robbed him because we've not paid our tithe; our 10%. There is no tithing stipulation in the New Testament. In the New Testament there's no limit placed on God's people. We are free to give more or less than 10%. What we are called is to be sacrificial and generous.

We're not under a specific one size fits all law. But we're told to consider what we have and give to God sacrificially and generously. For some that may well be 10%, for others that may well be a lot less, and for some it may well be a lot more. The amount is unimportant. Some could be giving away 50% but still be doing that with a bad attitude to God. Someone else may only be able to give 1% but is doing that with great sacrifice and generosity.

For us, the New Testament people of God, the church. For us, we rob God when we don't give sacrificially or generously. God has given us everything. God has purified us, he's made us acceptable to him, he's given us eternal life. In response to that are we robbing him by withholding our money?

Now if you want to think about this a bit more I'd recommend looking at 2 Corinthians 8-9. But let me just read 2 verses from there. "Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.⁷ Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Our attitude to our money reflects our attitude to God. Are we showing we reject God by storing up wealth for ourselves with no reference to God? Or are we sacrificially and generously giving to God cheerfully? After all God has done so much for us, whatever we could give him would never be enough to repay him for the life that he's given us.

But what's the result of returning to God?

4. The result – Blessing from God (10b-12)

Their attitude to God; their unfaithfulness towards God; the fact they've turned away from God's decrees, has resulted in them being under a curse. What was that curse? Well if you look at what the blessing will be in 10-12 it's the opposite. It seems they had a draught. Their crops had pests devouring them. Their vines were dropping their fruit before they were ready to be picked. But if they do return to God the blessings God pours out are overwhelming. Look down from verse 10. The floodgates of heaven will pour out. It will rain. The pests will not devour their crops. The vines will keep their fruit. Their land will be a delightful land. And all the nations will call them blessed.

Just as a quick aside, Malachi isn't teaching works based salvation. The idea that if you do the right thing God will be happy with you and you will earn your way into his family. The Bible always teaches salvation by faith. God does all the work for salvation his people do nothing, they are totally passive. And we've seen that already in Malachi. Right at the start God told them he loved them because he chose them. They didn't chose God, he chose them. They are his people because of what God did, not what they did.

Here God is telling them what it looks like to be one of his people. God expects them to display their family likeness." A true follower of God will try and live the way God wants. They will want to display their true identity as part of His family. That was true in Malachi's day and is just as true today. We don't live like this to be saved, we live like this because we already are. I expect Henry & Helena to behave a certain way because they are members of my family. If they don't behave that way they're still part of the family, but they are rejecting our family values. Likewise, with God and His family.

But, back to this passage in Malachi. Why would they want to return? Well it seems a fairly simple choice between curse or blessing. A simple choice of living like one of God's people or rejecting God.

What about us? If we withhold what is rightfully God's, will we be cursed in material ways? If we aren't sacrificial or generous with our money, will God curse us in the same way? In some ways, it would be handy if it were that formulaic, at least we'd know where we stood. But for us it works differently. God withheld physical, material blessings from the guys in Malachi's day. For us the withholding isn't at the wallet, bank balance end, it's at the heart end. For us our wallets could remain healthy but our hearts could wither. When we hold on to what should be God's our relationship with him becomes less and less close. Less and less enjoyable.

The consequence of robbing God might mean we have more materially but less spiritually. But, if we stop doubting God and trust him with our money, we'll find God is trustworthy. God doesn't change, so if we're faithful then we'll be blessed. Ephesians 1 tells us we **have** every spiritual blessing in Christ. Being a Christian is the greatest privilege, the greatest joy this world has to offer. It may not be the easiest life; it may not be the richest life. But it's the best life, it's the most joyful life. Even in tough times Christians should be joyful. Why? Because we have every spiritual blessing in Christ.

It may be that God has blessed you with material wealth. And it's true that all of us are in the top small percentage of wealthy people if you look at the whole world's average income. But some of us have been blessed with wealth even from a British perspective. Praise God. But that's not the blessing that the New Testament talks about for Christians. The New Testament talks about spiritual blessings now and physical blessing in eternity.

And that makes perfect sense when we remember that the Old Testament blessings tended to relate to the land. Follow God's word so things will go well with you in the land. It's true too for New Testament people, if we follow God's word it will go well for us in the land. Blessings are linked to the land. For us the land points to eternity. That's when we will live for eternity as God's people in God's land ruled by God's perfect King, Jesus. That's when our spiritual blessings will, wonderfully, become our physical ones.

So, how should we respond to this passage in Malachi? Well we do exactly as God says in verse 7. "Return to me and I will return to you." And we show we've done this with our attitude to money. God says "if you trust me with your wallets, if your attitude to your wallets reflects your attitude to me, then see the blessing I'll give you."