

**Sunday 7<sup>th</sup> November 2021**  
**Malachi 3:6-12**  
**Rev.Scott Burton**  
**Brightons Parish Church**

Let us take a moment to pray before we think about God's word. Let us pray.

Holy Spirit, come among us please, and reveal to us the heart of our Heavenly Father.

Holy Spirit, come among us and lead us in the ways of Jesus.

Holy Spirit, come, we pray, with power and deep conviction, for we ask it in Jesus name. Amen.

I was just on the news yesterday, I was reading that Greta Thunberg has said already that COP26 is a failure and it makes me wonder 'I wonder what makes her say that I?' I wonder maybe, what has been the biggest blocker? So, that maybe hasn't been the success people might have hoped for. So, why don't you turn to your neighbor once again and for 30 seconds share what you think has been the biggest blocker towards COP26 maybe the success we hoped for. 30 seconds. Over to you.

Well, I'm gonna jump in there again. Obviously, you could probably talk about this for hours so feel free again get a cuppa after the service or chat outside, at least it's not raining today, you can have a blether there if you wish or you can let me know on the way out the door what you came up with but a straw poll - anyone blame the politicians? Yeah, some politicians there, and there are probably many other reasons you might give but politicians is probably going to be one of the top ones. It's easy to blame them especially when we see all the shenanigans in the news this last week with politicians but I wonder if what holds politicians back is fear, fear of what voters will think, that if we go too far, too fast, voters will show their disapproval by ousting the current government from government and so, you can't go too far too fast in case it risks the taxpayer and their vote and costs the taxpayer too much. Because, if we're honest, even on the individual level, we can often be profit before people, we can be self before collective survival, and when it comes to money, when it comes to the money in our pocket and the balance in our bank, and the stuff in our lives, we get very possessive.

And, you know, the same was true in Malachi's day. Earlier in the book of Malachi God challenged, through the prophet, the quality of the people's giving but now He comes to challenge the quantity of their giving. He said earlier "Return to me and I will return to you. But you ask "How are we to return?" The people don't even know, they've wandered away from God "Will a mere mortal rob God?" the Lord says "Yet you rob me but you ask 'How are we robbing you?' In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse, your whole nation because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse." And maybe we're wondering 'Well, what's the issue here God? Are you a money-grabbing God? Are you just a killjoy? Are you wanting just to stifle the people and deprive them of good things? What's going on here?' And maybe that confirms your perspective of church, as you hear of us asking for you to give money towards the Guild projects are you maybe thinking 'Well, the church is always after money, and look there God is, all of us after money.' So, why is God calling His people to give? Why? What's going on underneath the surface?

Well, first of all, we might be thinking also 'What is the tithe?' And so, just in case you don't know, the tithe was the first 10 percent of the produce, the crops, the income that

individuals had and they would give that first 10 percent, to give that first 10 percent away, give it to the workings of the temple, to serve God's purposes, and give it to care for the poor and needy in the community and, actually, if you add up the tithes and offerings both the regular and the occasional, it's estimated that potentially the people gave away 25 percent of their income, and that's quite, quite a startling amount isn't it! And yet, the people have this attitude that while I'm not going to give the whole time I'm just going to give a bit of it and maybe they're thinking 'Well, it's my stuff, it's my money, I should get to determine what I do with it.' and or maybe they're thinking 'Well, I don't have enough God, I don't have enough and You know once I have enough I'll give a wee bit more, so just give us a break!' They are holding back some of their tithes and God thinks that's a problem. Clearly, He thinks they're robbing Him somehow. So, what's that about? How can God be claiming they are robbing Him when it's their stuff?

Well, the problem is, the scriptures teach that it's not their stuff. In the Psalms we read 'The earth is the Lord's and everything in it.' Their stuff is actually God's. Everything that we have is the Lord's, it belongs to Him the scriptures teach and so, we are not in the position of ownership, we are in the position of stewardship, what we have in our lives is given in sacred trust from God to steward, not own. We are called to be stewards but maybe you can resonate with the people, maybe you can resonate with that the feelings that they have because how often would we much rather God talked about anything else or asked anything else of us. Come to church - I'm right there with you God. Come to church two three times a day - no problem. Read your bible and pray for an hour - now that might be a struggle at times - but sure, okay, I'll take that on board for a little while at least. Ask me to serve, ask me to do anything else, but talk to me about my money, that's off-limits God, I'd rather You didn't. And I know this is difficult to hear because, actually, in comparison to a lot of places, you are a very generous congregation, very generous, and you're giving today in the shoe boxes and The Guild and things, but there are helpful points when we need to hear from God's word, a message about giving, to take stock, to evaluate what is our practice, How are we living? What's our relationship to our money? Do we see ourselves as stewards or have we fallen into that false understanding of ownership?

Now, maybe you're wondering also 'Well, is Scott saying we should tithe?' I won't ask a straw poll on that one, if you think we should or if you think I'm thinking that, because, actually there is no New Testament teaching about tithing. No New Testament teaching, it's all in the Old Testament, and so maybe you're thinking 'Well we're safe, we don't need to tithe, we're good!' and then I would share the counter argument that well, tithing was there before the law was given so, it wasn't just part of the Old Testament covenant and that many Christians over the centuries and years and many faithful and some of the most godly Christians have tithed. But let's, for a second instead, turn to the New Testament and see the example of the early church who (not that one either) who, they are recorded as 'They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need.' The church, when it was at the peak, we might say, of its health and understanding of the ways of Jesus, they were generous, sacrificially generous and probably gave much more than a simple tithe. They weren't Christians who said 'What is the minimum I can give? What's enough to keep God happy?' They were Christians who were sacrificially

generous, who responded to the marvelous grace they had received through Jesus dying on the cross for them, with such generosity that astounded people and this carried on over the centuries. You can look up in various articles and commentaries about Aristides of Athens says 'If the brethren have among them a man in need and they have not abundant resources, they fast for a day or two so as to provide the needy man with the necessary food.' Or later in 190 AD Lucian, who was not a Christian by the way, commented 'The earnestness with which people of this religion help one another and their needs is incredible. They spare themselves nothing for this end.'

Do we walk in that way, in that legacy or are we bare minimum Christians?

So, as you think about what you give to The Guild today, as you maybe go home and mull over this message, maybe take some time to look at your giving. Think 'Am I relating to my stuff as a steward or an owner? Am I a bare minimum Christian or am I a Christian of sacrificial generosity?' Because God calls His people to be stewards and to give generously.

But He calls them also to give, for another reason. We know from our passage this morning that the Lord says they're under a curse because they're robbing Him. Now, if that sounds strange to you, if that sounds like a spell to you, then please go back to an earlier sermon where I talked about the discipline of God, just a week or two ago, because this isn't a spell, this is God disciplining the nation because they have wandered from Him, the whole nation is wandering from Him and so, the whole nation is being disciplined by God and, most likely, is that they are experiencing drought a drought to wake up the nation to its senses. But God doesn't want to be that parent that disciplines His child forever. Have you been maybe a volunteer in a group or maybe a parent or an aunt, an uncle, a grandad, whatever it may be, and you have a child that just keeps pushing the buttons and you don't want to be that parent that just has to keep being firm and hard and disciplining? You don't want to be in that place, you want to get to that place where they heed what you're doing so that you can just bless them, enjoy them, and it moves into that different season, in that different way of life. God doesn't want to stay in that place of discipline. He wants to call them back and to bless them and we know that because of what He says next. He says '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. Then all the nations will call you blessed for yours will be a delightful land.'

In the verses, the words here, 'throw open the floodgates of heaven' God's simply meaning rain, not anything miraculous other than rain. That is what they need, that is what's being held back and God's discipline to them and He says if they will come back He wants to bless them, He wants to open the floodgates and they will, He will do so with such blessings, such generosity that it will become known in the nations around them of how good God has been to them. And so, so we when we look at these verses we start to think 'Well, if that was the case for them, if they were if they give and they're going to get this material blessing, do these verses apply to us as well, Scott.' because maybe you've heard on the radio or maybe you've read in a book or maybe you've seen

online teaching that says if you give your 10 percent then God will financially bless you, if you give to God then you can expect financial blessing and provision as well. Is that true teaching? Is that true teaching? Well again, as I've said through Malachi, the context is key in every passage, really the context is key and I came across this really helpful quote to remind us of the wider context of the scriptures. Peter Adams says 'Poverty and riches have a variety of meanings in the Old Testament. Poverty might be a sign of the righteous person being persecuted or of a righteous person having their trust in God tested. Similarly, riches were not always a sign of obedience, rich people were often opposed to God and oppressed others.' Context is important and to basically make a theology simply based on Malachi is to ignore the rest of the scriptures, the rest of the experience of New Testament believers, who are very faithful to God and yet are so poor. Even the early church and we often forget that many of the natural or physical parts of the Old Testament covenant, which the people operated under, it pointed forward to a spiritual reality in the new covenant, So for example, there was the curtain in the temple and it reminded the people of the division between God and humanity, that curtain that would be taken away through Jesus and that wide open invitation to anyone to come close to God through faith in Him, but the curtain wasn't the thing, the curtain was just a symbol, a reminder. Or we could take the sacrifices, the sacrifices reminding us that we do need forgiveness, that we have a problem with sin and that it had to be a greater, more perfect sacrifice because the sacrifice of animals cannot clear the conscience. And so, Jesus comes as that perfect sacrifice.

Or take the land, as we're talking about the land in these verses, the land was that place of God's kingdom and it was the place of home for the people, a place of security and blessing but, in the new covenant, the kingdom of God is wherever God reigns in a person's life and so, it is in your life, in my life and the home that the land was is now in the New Testament, the new heaven and the new earth that will come when Jesus returns, the physical and material, the natural, in the Old Testament was pointing towards the spiritual in the New Testament, under Jesus. And the same is true in this passage. I don't think we should interpret it as 'if you give 10 percent then you will get material blessing.'

For example, let's turn to the New Testament where Jesus is engaging with the rich young ruler. Remember that story. A young man comes to Jesus and he knows something's missing in his life and he doesn't have assurance of eternal life and so, he says to Jesus 'What else must I do?' and Jesus says to him 'Go and sell everything you have and give to the poor and you will have treasure in heaven.' There's no promise here of, give it all away and God will give you all back, there's this promise of treasure in heaven, but when we read these verses there's also the issue that we often think of heaven sort of as we did it with the children this morning, having been up there and that heaven is only future, that heaven is only we're storing up riches in the future, but we know that Jesus often talked about the kingdom of heaven, that the kingdom of heaven is breaking in, so that there is this present, immediate aspect to the kingdom of heaven as well. So, this young man is invited to know treasure and heaven treasure in the kingdom of heaven now, not just future, there is that future time but there is also a present time and, for that rich young man it might have looked like greater freedom that

he wasn't tied to his wealth, it might look like greater contentment or peace or joy, but also, as he gave, he would bring aspects of the kingdom into the lives of other people, he would bring hope and joy for them, he would bring compassion and justice for them, he would lift people out of poverty that they might have life.

The kingdom is not just future, it is now, which is why what we heard in The Guild projects is so incredible and so just encouraging and inspiring, because they are investing now, and through their actions now we are seeing the kingdom break in and change people's lives.

And so, there is this call of God, for people to give so as to change the world around them. In Malachi's day, if they gave, the world would change, their world would change and that God would bring rain but, in New Testament and in our lives, by our giving, we change the world around us. Let me give you another quote from history - there was the Emperor Julian, Roman Emperor Julian and he was actually an opponent to Christianity. He didn't like Christians, he persecuted them and in light of the generosity of the church he said 'I would be shameful when the impious Galileans', that is Christians, 'feed our own people along with their own, that ours should be seen to lack the help we owe them' and then he went on to order the creation of hospices. The generosity of God's people sparked the conscience of their opponent to them bring about good for a wider society. And again, if we look at the example of the New Testament church in the book of Acts just after that same verse that I quoted earlier 'They sold property and possessions to give to anyone who had need and the Lord added to their number daily those who were being saved.' Yes, they taught the scriptures, Yes, they worship God. Yes, they met in fellowship but part of their life was sacrificial generosity and all of it combined to see the Lord adding to their number daily. The world changed in part because of their giving.

But maybe you're wondering 'Well, is God just again after our money? Is God just wanting us to obey? Is God just wanting us to be faithful stewards?' because maybe that, maybe that just doesn't speak to your heart, maybe it just sounds like here's more of a list of things to do and obey.

And actually, there's a third reason that God causes people to give and it's at the very beginning of our chapter where in verses 6 and 7 the Lord said 'I the lord do not change. Return to me and I will return to you.' Return to me return to me return to me, in other words, repent, change your ways, come back to me. The Lord's heart is for His people. He longs for them. He loves them. As we looked at in the very first verses of Malachi, He has this unending love for them, a love that is faithful and constant and true, this love that is generous and forgiving, this love that, Yes disciplines them for good, but He longs to bless them and lead them into life and all its fullness. This is the love of God and it hasn't changed. He says this love has not changed, His heart is for them and He longs for them to respond in kind. He longs for them to love Him as He loves them because He's constantly working to restore, maintain and deepen this relationship with His people.

And the same is true in the life of Jesus. You know, just before Jesus said what He did to the rich young ruler the text says 'Jesus looked at him and loved him.' What was in that look? What did it communicate? What did it anticipate?

I suspect that Jesus anticipates this young guy is going to say 'No, it's too much.' because Jesus knows where this young man's heart is and yet, in love, He still speaks the truth and in love He still gives that invitation knowing it will be rejected, but calling Him, yearning for Him to break free of that love of money, that love of wealth, and return to his Lord to, return to knowing Jesus, following Jesus, walking with Jesus. That is the heart of God here and in Malachi. It's the heart of God that is for you brothers and sisters and for me, for our hearts to be the Lord's, to be given to the Lord. That is God's desire and the yearning that is there within Him. It's the crux of the issue throughout Malachi really, that are we are people who will give our hearts to the Lord because He has given Himself to us.

Are we truly His people to the depths of our being? Do we love the Lord to the very core of who we are? Because to the very core of God, He loves you, His heart is for you and He longs for your heart to be for Him and that will be seen in every area of your life, where you could be spending your money because as the other verse on the screen before said 'Where your treasure is, there is your heart' and what you spend your money on will show you where your treasure is as well.

So, let's take the example of global warming and of the climate crisis that we have in COP 26. It's actually more costly to live a more ecological life. Have you noticed that? Have you tried to swap away from plastics? It's not easy and it's no cheap. But are you willing to pay the price, are you willing to pay the price of that change to be a steward not only of your money but of this creation that God has entrusted to us? Is your heart enough for the Lord that you care for what He cares for?

Or the giving of our church. What we do is in the name of the Lord and for the Lord and it can't happen without resource. Is your heart enough for the Lord that you invest in His purposes that you give generously to The Guild projects or to the Shoebox Appeal or whatever? It may be are you a Christian who's a bare minimum Christian. 'Oh God, this is the spare change I've got in my pocket this week? or do you take a more disciplined, ordered, proactive approach because God has you? Give your devotion to God rather than to your finances and to your wealth and so you set up a standing order and you give regularly rather than just what have I got this week.

The crux of the issue is that God calls His people to give because He wants our hearts to be right with Him and in relation to their stuff because when His people give, and give rightly, and have a right relationship to their money, then they're not possessed by their possessions and they overflow with generosity. When they return to the Lord with all their hearts, we see our role as stewards and our possessions as gifts to share. When we love the Lord to the depths of our being, we will be a people who faithfully give and, through our giving, change the world that little bit. I pray it may be so. Amen.

We close our service as we sing together our final hymn 'I want to walk with Jesus Christ' This call, this yearning to be faithful followers of Jesus, to walk in His footsteps, to receive His teaching, to obey His ways. And so we close our service with our final hymn.