

Debate with God: A Question of Obedience

Malachi 3:6-3:12

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 16 October 2005

Introduction

I don't read many crime stories. But one genre of crime story does intrigue me: "Dumb Thief stories." Do you know what these are? They are stories about people who pull off robberies, but who are so stupid that they practically guarantee they will be caught. Listen to these:

- A man living in Virginia Beach was charged with auto theft. He appeared in court on the Friday when he was supposed to. The problem was that he drove to court in the car that he was charged with stealing! Not a bright move.
- A man in Ft. Collins, Colorado, robbed the same grocery store twice in one day. And he told the clerk he'd be back to rob it a third time. Sure enough, he returned a few hours later, and was arrested by detectives who were there to investigate the first two robberies. Not a smart thing to do.
- Two men in Kentucky decided to pull off the front of an automated teller machine by running a chain from the machine to the bumper of their truck. The problem was it pulled the bumper off of their truck. The men fled the scene, but the chain was still attached to the machine; their bumper was still attached to the chain; and their license plate was still attached to the bumper!
- A Louisiana man walks into a convenience store, puts \$20 on the counter and asks for change. The clerk opens the cash drawer and starts to empty out all the change. The man pulls out a gun and asks for all the cash in the drawer, which the clerk gave him. The man took the cash, left the \$20 on the counter. And what was the total amount of cash that he got from the drawer? \$15! He left \$20 behind!

But maybe the all-time dumbest thief story is actually found in the Bible in the Book of Malachi. Turn with me to Malachi chapter 3 (p. 929). As you probably know by now, this book is framed as a debate between God and his people, the people of Israel. Their hearts have grown cold towards him, their faith has fossilised. They're just going through the motions, turning up at the temple, pretending to worship God, but he's not impressed:

⁶ "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷ Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' ⁸ "Will a man rob God?"

The obvious answer is: "No. How dumb would you have to be? God knows and sees everything. Nobody in their right mind would try to rob God." But God says, "Yet you rob me." The people say, "How do we rob you?" "In tithes and offerings." Now right at the beginning of his relationship with Israel, God instituted the practice of tithing. Every Israelite was to give ten percent of his income back to God. The *first* ten percent. It wasn't a case of paying all the bills first and then giving the Lord a tenth of what was left. The first ten percent was to be brought to the storehouse at the temple. Over and above these tithes people could bring other offerings. But the tithe was mandatory. So because the people of Israel were not bringing their full tithes and offerings, God says:

⁹ You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰ Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 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. ¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. ¹² "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Now a question. God didn't need their money, right? Just like he doesn't need ours. Psalm 24:1 says that the whole earth is his, and everything in it. So why does God make such a big deal out of this? Why does he want his people to give? Ever asked that question? This passage suggests at least three answers.

Giving expresses our *gratitude* to God for the *past* (vv6-7)

First of all, giving expresses our gratitude to God for the past. Notice how this passage starts: "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them." It starts by looking backwards into the past, to the time when God chose Jacob and his descendents – the people of Israel – to be his special people. In spite of their disobedience, he rescued them from slavery in Egypt and brought them into the Promised Land, a

land flowing with milk and honey. Everything they had was a gift from God. The practice of tithing was to serve as a reminder of that fact. It was a way of expressing gratitude to God. As King David said in 1 Chronicles 29:14: "Everything comes from you, and we have only given you what comes from your hand."

But we forget that. A woman is at an airport waiting to get on a plane. She buys a little snack bag of her favorite Oreo cookies. She's in the waiting area, sitting down, and there's a man that she doesn't know sitting next to her. On the little armrest between them is this little snack bag of Oreo cookies. Without saying a word, the guy sitting next to her reaches in, takes out a cookie and starts to eat it. She's furious! So she reaches into the bag, takes out a cookie and starts to eat it. And he just smiles and nods at her. Apparently, he can't speak any English. He reaches in and takes another cookie. And she's livid, so she reaches in and takes another cookie. They both keep doing this until there's only one cookie left. The man reaches in and takes the last cookie, breaks it in half and offers half to her. Then he eats it himself. She's beside herself! She gets on the plane, sits down in her seat, reaches into her pocketbook and sees that her bag of cookies is still in her purse. Not only did he not eat her cookies, she was eating his cookies in the airport and didn't even know it! Some of us in this room have a lot of cookies. Whose cookies are they really? We think they're ours. If we're feeling generous, maybe we'll give a few of our cookies away, but the rest are mine. Tithing is a way of remembering that everything is God's. It's a way of expressing my gratitude to him for all that he's given me – the grace he's given me in Jesus (2 Cor 8:9).

Giving exposes our *commitment* to God in the *present* (vv7-9)

A second reason for giving is that it expresses – or exposes – our commitment to God in the present. In ancient Israel there were actually several different kinds of tithes:

- There was a general tithe that was paid to the Levites and priests to fund the system of temple worship, all of which was designed to point people towards God, and his holiness, and our need for Jesus, the Lamb of God who would take away the sin of the world (Num 18:21).
- Secondly, the people were to set aside another ten percent of their income to pay for the national festivals like Passover (Deut 14:22-26). These feasts were also designed to point towards Jesus and the sacrifice he would make on our behalf.
- Then every third year a third tithe was required to care for the poor and needy in Israel (Deut 14:28-29). It was a kind of social welfare system that demonstrated the loving and righteous nature of God and his kingdom.

So the total tithes required of each Israelite amounted to an average of 23.3% of their annual income. The intention was that, through these tithes and the system they funded, Israel would serve as a kind of national display of God's character and kingdom. That was God's purpose: through Israel he would draw all nations to himself (Ex 19:5-6; Gen 12:3). And that's why he says to his people, "You are under a curse." By withholding their tithes and offerings they are undermining God's saving purpose in the world, they're blocking the nations from finding their way to God, and they're exposing their lack of commitment to God and his agenda. In Deuteronomy 14:23 it says, "The purpose of tithing is to teach you always to put God first in your lives." When we tithe, we're learning to put God and his agenda first.

I love that story about Herman and Henrietta. They were touring their brand-new house, a house that Henrietta had paid for with her money, a fact of which she often reminded Herman. In each room of the house, she said to her husband, "Herman, if it were not for my money, we wouldn't be here." Herman didn't say a word. That afternoon a truck delivered to the house a load of furniture, furniture that Henrietta paid for with her money. After the furniture was in place, the couple toured the house again. As they observed each room, beautifully appointed and magnificently decorated, Henrietta reminded her husband, "Herman, if it were not for my money, this furniture would not be here." Again, Herman was silent. Late in the afternoon a truck came with a special piece of furniture which was to be the focal point of the den, a combination stereo-television-computer all wrapped into one gorgeous piece of furniture which Henrietta paid for with her money. When it was in place, Henrietta again addressed her husband, "If it were not for my money, that piece of furniture would not be here." Finally, Herman spoke, "Honey, I don't want to make you feel bad, but if it were not for your money, I wouldn't be here!" That's why giving is so important. It shows we're not just after God's gifts. We're committed to him and his purposes in this world. I can't think of a greater purpose or cause to give your life to than the kingdom of God: reaching people far from God. The dividends are eternal.

Giving extends our *faith* in God with regards to the *future* (vv10-12)

One more reason to give. Giving expresses and extends our faith in God for the future. Why were the people here withholding tithes and offerings? At least one of the reasons was that pests and droughts were

devouring their crops, and reducing their income (v 10). Obviously, in those circumstances the people didn't trust God enough to provide for their future needs. So God does something that is really unprecedented in Scripture. He says to his people: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. Test me in this and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of Heaven and throw out so much blessing that you will not have room for it." Some television preachers use this verse to teach that God will make you obscenely rich if you will just give all your money to their ministry. That's treating God like a vending machine. Put ten dollars in and he'll spit twenty dollars out. But this passage is not teaching greed. It's teaching faith. God says, "Put me first in your finances – give generously to me and my kingdom – and I will look after your needs. I will enable you to keep being generous" (2 Cor 9:10-11). Having said that, the greatest blessing in giving is not material. It's the sense of satisfaction and purpose and freedom that no amount of money could buy.

I was reading this week about a guy called John Bechtel. He and a few other people wanted to start a Christian camp for kids in Hong Kong. Hong Kong is a city where sometimes as many as 5,000 people live in a single high-rise on one acre of ground. They wanted a camp where kids could get out into nature and meet God. They found out that there was a company that had built a facility for one million dollars, and the company said they would sell this facility to John Bechtel and his group for \$250,000. One of John's colleagues said: "I'll try to do some fund-raising on the side." For three months he worked at it, but he got nothing. Nobody wanted to give towards the project. He did receive, though, one letter from a little girl in Georgia named Melinda Holmes. She wrote: "Please find my ice cream money for two weeks enclosed. Please use it to help buy a camp for young people in Hong Kong." There was \$1 inside the envelope. That's all they got. At the end of three months, the friend says to John: "All we've got is a dollar." And John says: "OK, I'll give it a try." Imagine this. He walks into the company and says: "Didn't quite come up with \$250,000." They ask: "How much do you have?" "I've got a dollar." They sent the offer back to the Board where the answer was: "Well, if the camp's going to be used to help young kids, we'll sell it to you for a dollar." That dollar is framed now in the camp as a reminder of what God can do when somebody is faithful. As of today, over 1,000,000 kids have attended this camp in Hong Kong. Over 100,000 of them have come to faith in Christ. Later on, John happened to be at a church where he was telling this story, and a young woman came up to him afterwards and said: "I was that little girl." Her name was Melinda Holmes. John asked Melinda: "Would you like to go over to Hong Kong and see what has happened there?" She said, "Yes." They arrange to fly her over. Melinda walked through the camp, saw what God had done, and wept. One little girl. One dollar.

That's the real promise here. If we will give what we can to reach people far from God, he says, "I will bless your efforts beyond your wildest dreams." Verse 12: "all the nations will call you blessed."

So what's your giving like? What characteristics should mark our giving? In 1 Corinthians 16:2, Paul says: "Every Sunday each of you must put aside some money, in proportion to what you have earned ... for the offering" (TEV). Let's quickly unpack this. It outlines three characteristics of good giving:

- It is to be **periodic**: "Every Sunday..." God wants our giving to be systematic, not spasmodic. Intentional, not casual. The stakes are too high. If you are struggling to organise a regular, weekly pattern of giving, try setting up an automatic payment.
- It is to be **planned**: "you are to put aside some money..." When my dad died, I was charged with sorting out his affairs, his books, his finances. I found a journal where he had recorded the amount he and mum had budgeted to give each year. I know that because he had thoughtfully and prayerfully planned his giving in advance, he was able to do it without any sense of haste or pressure. Do you regularly pray about and review your giving? This should be the first thing we do in relation to our money, before we take on all our other financial commitments.
- It is to be **proportional**: "...in proportion to what you have earned." Tithing was never meant to be mechanical or legalistic – giving a set amount or percentage, and then clinging to the rest. It's giving what you can, generously, sacrificially, because you love God. My hunch is that God honours some poorer people who don't give a tenth because what they do give is a sacrificial amount in relationship to what they earn. Whereas for many wealthy people, giving ten percent is a way of robbing God. For them a tithe virtually becomes a tip.

Last year we did a campaign called *Forty Days of Purpose*. It was based on a book by Rick Warren. That book has been the biggest selling book in America for the last three years. It is currently the number one selling book in the world. It's sold thirty million copies. Obviously, it's brought Rick Warren and his wife extraordinary financial opportunities. But after thinking and praying about it, they made five decisions. First, they decided that they would not change their life style one bit, no matter how much money comes in. Secondly, Rick stopped drawing a salary from the church. Third, he added up all that his church has paid him in the last 25 years, and paid it all back. (So when a journalist from *Newsweek* magazine interviewed Rick and asked him, as his first question, "How much does the church pay you?" Rick could answer, "Absolutely nothing; I've

worked for the church free for the last twenty-five years.”) Fourth, they set up a number of charitable foundations. And, finally, they’ve become reverse tithers. When they got married, they decided that each year they would in faith increase their tithe by one percent. Rick says, “Every time I give, it breaks the grip of materialism in my heart. There’s no antidote to materialism other than giving.” Now, because they can, they give away 90% of his income. What about you?

Questions

1. Jimmy Carter said, “When it comes to giving, some people will stop at nothing.” George Barrs, a pollster, found out in 2002 that only about 6% of people who claim to follow Jesus—about 6% of evangelical Christians—tithed. Why do you think people don’t tithe? Are they justified?
2. One common objection to tithing is that it doesn’t apply to us because we are no longer under law but grace. Do you agree? Read Genesis 14:17-20; 28:20-22; Matthew 23:23.
3. What is the “curse” that Malachi refers to in this passage? Why is it necessary? Read Deuteronomy 28 for some clues.
4. In Florida a man sued his church because, he claimed, “I delivered \$800 of my savings to the ... church in response to the pastor’s promise that blessings, benefits and rewards would come to the person who did tithe 10 per cent of his wealth. I did not and have not received these benefits.” Do you think Malachi 3:10-12 promises material blessing to those who give?
5. C. S. Lewis said, “I do not believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I am afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.” Mother Teresa said, “If you give what you do not need, it isn’t giving.” What do you think?
6. From 2 Corinthians 16:2 what three qualities should mark our giving?