

10/18/2020 - Sermon Manuscript

(Psalm 96)

Malachi 3:1-12

Matthew 22:15-22

I don't lay claim to any gift of clairvoyance - to being able to see inside people's hearts and minds and souls - but I think I can see how many of you reacted to our Scripture readings today: Taxes and tithes. Joy. He's going to ask us for money...well actually, I'm not. I am going to talk a little bit about that, but I'm actually going to be asking for a lot more than money from you. And no, I'm also not going to offer political commentary on the President's tax returns. I'm going to tell you instead about Jesus.

These two readings on the surface seem to have a very obvious, short-and-sweet meaning or moral - give your tithes and pay your taxes; a pretty easy sermon to give. There is however much more going on here than meets the eye. To help us understand this, we need to look at context - where is this all going on? Why is it all going on? Who is involved? Those two short-and-sweet phrases - From Malachi, verse 10 ('Bring the full tithe into the storehouse'), and from Matthew, verse 21 ('Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's') - have a lot to say to us beyond money.

The Book of Malachi, placed last in the Old Testament (but by no means least), is a book of prophecy. Prophecy is (simply put) a message from God. Indeed the word 'Malachi' means 'Messenger', and so the title of the book (and it's opening verse - 'the oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi') may be referring to the name of the prophet, or it may be simply stating that this is a prophecy from God by somebody. Some Jewish traditions ascribe the authorship of the book to Ezra (and interestingly the reformer John Calvin believed Malachi to be the surname of Ezra), whom you remember from my last sermon is involved with Nehemiah in the return of the Jews from Babylonian exile and the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem. Regardless of who the author is, this is the time period that Malachi is speaking into. It's a people who celebratorially return to their Promised Land, re-establish the keeping of law, build another temple, offer the sacrifices again...but yet again get all-too-comfortable and lapse back into their old ways.

Chapter 3 begins with a prediction of the coming of a messenger (another 'Malachi') who will 'prepare the way before me' (prepare the way before God). Where have we heard that before? Malachi is talking about John the Baptist, preparing the way for Jesus' coming. How does John do that? By calling for repentance and baptising. Why? Well because when God does come, he, in the words of Malachi, is like a 'refiner's fire' - 'he will purify the sons of Levi' (the priests...so that they can offer pure sacrifice), 'they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD'. This is all so that 'the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years'. This is the first key to understanding the giving of anything to God - **we do not give things to God in order to please him. God is already pleased with us in Jesus Christ if we put our faith in Him.** Malachi doesn't say 'give God more money and it will be pleasing' or 'give more grain', or fruit, or whatever, to make sure God is pleased...he says that God will send himself, he will cleanse the priests, and then their offering will be pleasing.

In the context of Malachi's immediate time, this is a message regarding the tribe set aside for serving the temple - the tribe of Levi - and the priests chosen out of Levi. But if the messenger coming *before* the cleansing is John the Baptist, and Jesus is God sent to us to *do* the cleansing...then who are the priests? We don't have priests in the same way anymore. Or do we? 1 Peter 2:9 calls all in the Church, all Christians, a 'royal priesthood'. We are *all* now the chosen priests called out to serve God. That's the amazing news of the Gospel. We're all washed just as the Levitical priests were washed before being appointed. We're all anointed as the priests were - anointed with the Holy Spirit. We all have access to God through our great High Priest, Jesus Christ, without any need for any other mediator or sacrifice or go-between. We are all the priests Malachi is talking about here.

So what's all this about tithing in the next section? It seems to contradict what's just been said - God says 'I will make your offering pleasing' and then he effectively is saying 'Give me more of your stuff and I will bless you'. Well in the lectionary for today, the reading from Malachi actually begins at this section - at verse 6, with the word 'For'. Beginning a reading from Scripture with the word 'For', is a little bit like starting a sentence with the word 'because'. I'm married to an elementary school teacher, and I am sure if I asked her whether beginning a sentence with 'because' was a good idea, the answer would be much the same as the teachers I remember being taught by - a resounding no. Why is this an unhelpful place to start in Malachi? Well, because what exactly? You've skipped over all of the context, all of the reasoning behind, and the backbone of everything that's about to be said. God speaks through Malachi and says I will send a messenger, I will cleanse you, I will make your offering pure, I will come in judgment...then comes the 'For', and the 'therefore', of verse 6 - because of what I've just said, and in light of it, do this and do that.

These commands from God to bring the full tithe, and his promises to bless, are in light of his declaration that he will send his messenger, and then himself, to cleanse his people, and then will come in judgment - a judgment of how you respond to that. It's a call to be ready and to repent, much the same type of call that John the Baptist brought in preparation for Jesus' coming. It's also more than that however - 'For I the LORD do not change' verse 6 begins. If we relate this back to verses 1 through 5, it's as if God is saying that none of this is new; I've told you about this before. Prophets before Malachi - Ezekiel, Isaiah, etc. have prophesied of my coming to cleanse you, so what's the deal? Why aren't you ready? God can never be accused of dropping a surprise bombshell on his people, and he can never be accused of a lack of patience or mercy - he says 'therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed'; **God does not change; he does not change or turn back on his promises, and because of those promises, he continues to be patient with his people and not destroy them because of their sin.** But there will be a Final Judgment at the appointed time, equally as-promised.

God doesn't need offerings from us of grain or animals or money or anything at all - he doesn't get hungry, he doesn't get thirsty, he doesn't spend too much one week and has to 'hang on' until the next paycheck. God is fully and perfectly content within himself. He *chooses* to create us, to promise us things, to bless us and guide us, to forgive us and have mercy upon us, because he *wants* to as an expression of his perfect love. God is not a narcissist - he doesn't need approval or affection from others to feel okay with himself. Those things are for us because *we* need them. We were created to *be* in relationship with others and our creator. So again, why the tithes? The tithe (in its various forms) was a part of

the Jewish Law. It was a sin to *not* tithe, and to withhold the prescribed amount of giving for a particular year, and was punishable.

There are three key places in the Old Testament where the tithe is described - Leviticus 27, Numbers 18, and Deuteronomy 14. (there will be an opportunity to explore these passages in more detail in our Life Groups this week, and I have put excerpts from these chapters in your bulletin insert). In two out of three of these references, the tithes are specifically related to the support of the tribe of Levi - the priestly tribe of Israel the tribe that was tasked with looking after the tabernacle and later the Temple, and from which the priests came. There is certainly a direct practical application that can be pulled across to us from that in considering our giving of whatever we give - again, I'm not just talking about money here. In fact, if you do look up all of these areas of Scripture, you'll find that the giving of money, or gold or silver, or shekels, is not mentioned at all as tithing. It's grain, and livestock, and fruit - it's a portion of the harvest for sustenance. People who are called by God to full-time ministry need sustenance and resources - not just for themselves and for their own families, but also in order to have the time and the resources to equip everybody else to do the ministry of the Gospel. We have a wonderful full-time priest here in Father John, with a wonderful family, who simply would not be able to do what he does at the level that he does it without the church providing for him.

To relate this all back to Malachi, whilst in two out of three of the references to tithing we have, practical support of the tribe of Levi is connected, in all three references, the idea of tithing is connected to the idea of **the giving of first-fruits**, or the firstborn of livestock - the firstborn the Jews gave to God as sacred, as dedicated to him. And in return for this tiny amount in the grand scale of things (while the definition of tithe is a tenth, by the time you add up all of the various different types of tithe required, there would have been a give of around 15-20% of total yield, still leaving 80-85%), God doesn't say thank you very much, looking forward to the next tithe. He sends them (and us) something magnitudes beyond the little that they (and we give) - he promises unending blessing to the Jews, and he sends us his own firstfruits, his firstborn son, asking us for a mere mustard seed of faith that he will grow. The tithe is meant as **an act of faith, of joyful obedience, and of gratitude**. That act of faith particularly comes to light in connection with first-fruits - an offering in joyful anticipation of the rest to come. It's not a checkbox obligation - it's meant to cultivate a heart aware that not even 0.1% of any yield of anything would be possible without God.

So why are the Jews of Malachi's time withholding it? Well there are a few things going on here. Certainly, there is an insufficient amount indicated, which is in contravention of the Law. Some Jewish traditions also interpret this as not giving with the right heart or intention, which would link back to our first-fruits connection - a begrudging 'last-fruits', rather than a joyful 'first-fruits'. But we can actually look in the Bible to get an idea of the situation; in Nehemiah 13:10 (remember, Malachi is dated around or slightly after the time of Nehemiah), as worship and sacrifice in the newly-rebuilt Temple is being instituted. Nehemiah sees that the tithe is being abused; the portion due to the rest of the tribe of Levi as the Law commands is not being given, meaning that the priests, singers, cleaners etc. of the temple don't have time to facilitate worship and sacrifice any more, as they have to farm resources to stay alive. So again we see a practical situation which reflects the heart of the nation of Judah - a people that are not putting importance on the worship and recognition of God,

because he'll either just be fine without or, or we don't need him any more now that we have our land back.

The point for us here is what is our heart in giving of our time, our resources, our gifts and talents, our money (to put it as one thing amongst many) to what God is calling us and those around us to do for the Gospel? It's not about a set amount of money or percentage. This is a slightly controversial thing to say, given that the Constitution of the Anglican Church in North America states, 'The biblical tithe is the minimum standard of giving to support the Mission of the Church, and should be taught and encouraged at every level in the Church.' Certainly I do think that a 10% guideline is healthy to work with and pray about - a starting point from which to examine one's heart toward giving (which is likely the spirit behind this statement - before anybody thinks about reporting me to the bishop for being uncanonical!), but I'm also very mindful of it becoming that begrudging last-fruit if we put a number on it, and I am equally mindful of the account of the widow's offering in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark. Very briefly, an offering box is set up in the Temple, and Jesus is watching the crowds drop their coins in. Many wealthy groups pass by and throw in huge amounts of money. Then an impoverished widow comes up, and puts in an amount worth less than a penny. Jesus turns to his disciples and says that this woman has given more than all of these others rich people have - they all gave comfortably from their wealth, whereas she gave everything she had. Jesus isn't just talking about the amounts of money there. This offering box mentioned was not for the mandated tithe, it was for additional, voluntary, freewill offerings. All of the rich groups were just checking the 'God box', but this woman gave everything she had to God.

God says through Malachi in verse 10 as we continue through this passage, 'put me to the test'. We should certainly not take this to directly mean for us that if we give more money to the Church, God will give us better health, or more cars, or a bigger house, or an easier life. Remember it's not about giving more stuff that God needs to be satisfied, it's about our hearts, and what God is calling us to do on the journey of our salvation in service of him and his people. It's a challenge for the Jews of Malachi's time to obey the Law and trust in God's promises, to let go of that need to control their own lives. It's a challenge for us equally to 'let go', and walk by faith in Christ one step at a time, as Father John was talking about last week. A life lived by faith does not promise fame, wealth, fortune, or comfort...but it does promise something magnitudes greater. It promises the life you were created to live with your creator. It promises growth in love, holiness, and perfection. It promises the salvation of your very soul into eternity. So try it!

So what about taxes? Recall I brought up the account of the widow's single coin, and I made the point that Jesus, in his judgment that she had given everything she had, while the rich had given a token from their plentitude, was not just talking about amounts of money. Well, something similar is going on in our Gospel reading from Matthew - we've talked about the reasons why the Jews in Malachi are withholding, misusing, and abusing tithes. What's going on here with the Pharisees? Why are they asking Jesus whether it is lawful to pay tax, or tribute (the Greek word is the equivalent of 'census' - your 'annual dues' to the state) to the emperor Caesar? Verse 15 tells us that the Pharisees planned to 'entangle' Jesus - the Greek word here is talking about setting a trap, for an animal for example. Jesus has been going around saying that people's sins are forgiven, healing the sick, and proclaiming the coming of the Kingdom of Heaven. The Pharisees are living 'the good life' as things are;

they're the 'top dogs', they're in charge and literally laying down The Law. They don't *want* things to change. They want Jesus out of the way, to be discarded as just another crazy somebody trying to instigate revolution. If they can coax him into saying no, don't pay your tax to Caesar, they can have him tried by the Roman state (which they eventually do, albeit for different reasons). If they can coax him into saying yes, the average man-on-the-street might turn against him and see that he's actually *not* going to bring about change - that he's just another all-talk-and-no-action guy.

Jesus responds, 'render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and render to God the things that are God's'. The Greek word here literally means to 'give back'. That's why Jesus asks to see the coin with Caesar's face on it (a picture of which is included on your bulletin insert). If it's Caesar's coin anyway, then it's his! What's going on underneath however is reflected in our Psalm from today -

Verse 5: 'As for all the gods of the nations, they are but idols, but it is the LORD WHO made the heavens'. God created everything, and God sustains everything, *including* Caesar and his coins, so it's a way of being truthful and prophetic, but also not lying, and not falling into the Pharisees' trap. Jesus here is, in his own words, being wise as a serpent, and yet harmless as a dove.

Now there's a whole spectrum of views on taxation, but fundamentally, what we always need to bear in mind, from Malachi, is to always give God our first-fruits in everything, to make him the foundation and center of our lives. I hate to be the bearer of bad news to supporters of the Democratic Party, but more taxation is not going to save America or make everything perfect for everybody, and I hate to break this to supporters of the Republican Party, but decreased taxation won't do that either. Are we then to abandon this entire sphere, and not pay our taxes at all because God is more important?

Well no. You may recall the survey of Evangelical Christians that Fr John discussed last Sunday, where participants were asked who they hope their vote in the upcoming election would most benefit? A majority of participants answered that they hoped that their vote would most benefit either themselves, their families, or people like them, with a small remaining percentage saying that they hoped their vote would most benefit people that the country had failed. What witness of Christianity is that to non-Christians? Does it tell them that Christians are only 'in it for themselves'? We certainly shouldn't place all of our faith in the secular political processes around us, but should we engage in them in the ways that we can, and advocate for love of neighbor, for transparency and godliness in how that money is used, and of love for quote-unquote 'enemy' - those not like us? Absolutely. We should aim as far we can without disobeying God to be model citizens, as the benefits and advantages of our citizenship can be used to further the Kingdom of God; Saint Paul says, 'To the Jews I was a Jew, to the Greeks I was a Greek...' to the Californians, I was a Californian?

What we should be seeking to be as Christians in the world, in our Lord Jesus Christ's own words, is to be, 'as wise as serpents, and as harmless as doves'. Thanks to the nature of human sin, we're all pretty good at the 'wise as serpents' part...but 'harmless as doves'? That takes analysis, stepping back, serious introspection and examination of the wider-reaching consequences of our choices and actions. Sometimes we may even think we're being harmless, but are we being wise? Sometimes doing nothing and aloofly stepping out of a situation is actually not harmless at all.

So pay your taxes and pay your tithes - that's where we started today. Hopefully you've seen that it's not as simple or black-and-white as that; God calls us to cultivate a heart of joyful first-fruit giving of our entire selves to him, and he calls us to be wise as serpents, yet harmless as doves in the world. Consider, and contemplate, and pray about the heart behind your walk with God, and what you give in time, resources, money, etc. etc, and pray about the ways in which God is calling you to engage with the world, and be a part of his mission to make disciples of all nations - that the Church, in the words of Malachi right at the end of our reading, might be a 'land of delight', that all nations will call blessed.

Amen.