

“Malachi: Ancestors, Tithes, and Locusts”  
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Second-Ponce de Leon Baptist Church  
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*<sup>6</sup> For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. <sup>7</sup> Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, “How shall we return?”*

*<sup>8</sup> Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, “How are we robbing you?” In your tithes and offerings! <sup>9</sup> You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! <sup>10</sup> Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. <sup>11</sup> I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the LORD of hosts. <sup>12</sup> Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts.*

The Washington Post journalist was at the worship service in Osasco, Brazil, working on her article about the current state of Christian worship that country. In the service she attended, Pastor Gabriel Camargo is on stage and the stage is encircled by 12 large wooden crosses. He waves fake Brazilian money before the congregation and says, “*God will bless you if you give a lot more to the church*”. Then, he extends his arm, holding out a big black pouch, instructing his congregation to pick up their wallets and purses and come forward. About a dozen people, from the working-class neighborhood where the church is located, come forward and dump bills and coins into the bag. Not to worry – if you have no cash, an usher was there with a credit card machine as Pastor Camargo said, “*You’ll have so much money, after giving generously to the church, that smoke is going to come out of this machine.*”<sup>1</sup>

Story #2 - Referencing Mark’s gospel and the hundredfold blessing, Kenneth Copeland writes in his book, *Laws of Prosperity*, “*Do you want a hundredfold return on your money? Give and let God multiply it back to you. No bank in the world offers this kind of return! Praise the Lord!*”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sarah Pulliam Bailey, “How the prosperity gospel is sparking a major change in predominantly Catholic Brazil”, The Washington Post, October 31, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Copeland, *Laws of Prosperity*

Wait, I'm not through. I saw this preacher on YouTube myself. Mike Murdock appealing for \$1,000 seed gifts. He told the viewers that you can't do much with \$1,000 – you can't even buy a good sofa with a thousand dollars. But, if you will give it to his ministry – a seed to be planted, then the harvest on that seed will be great. But you have to give the \$1,000 seed gift.

*“Today is the poorest you will ever be for the rest of your life”, he promises. “I pray that God will give you miracle money.” “Go to the phone right now, the number is on your screen.”*

And, for an added blessing, he asks viewers to donate \$1,000 with a credit card, because if you use a credit card to make your seed gift, God will erase your credit card debt. *“As you use your faith, God is going to wipe out your credit card debts.”*<sup>3</sup>

I'm not making this up – and these stories make my skin crawl. There are many more examples out there, I just stopped at three.

All three of these preachers are inside a contemporary theological tradition that is commonly called, the Prosperity Gospel. Simply, the Prosperity Gospel declares that God wants to bless you and that giving more money to God translates into financial blessing for you. T.D. Jakes, Joel Osteen, and Atlanta's own Creflo Dollar are among the most famous preachers in the country who preach from within this tradition.

I have been your pastor for more than five years, so you know by now that just watching the videos, in preparation for this sermon, made me crazy. When I finished watching the Mike Murdock “seed planting” video, I wanted to go home and take a shower.

So, with that said, what am I supposed to make of today's scripture that says, *“Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts... Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”*

(I'd like to call on Dr. David Hull to come and finish this morning's message.)

Really, what are we supposed to do with this promise from God to the people of Israel?

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<sup>3</sup> YouTube, The Lies of False Prosperity Preachers and Teachers

First, a reminder of where we are in the story... Yes, however sad this is for you – we have arrived at the end of our seven-week journey through the Minor Prophets. Today, Malachi, is the last of our series and the last book in our Old Testament canon. The Israelites are back from their exile during Babylonian rule. Like last week, the Persians now rule the region, and the Jews have been allowed back into Jerusalem and have begun the rebuilding of the temple.

Malachi does not sound like all of the other prophets. He has his own preaching style. Instead of preaching as oracle, proclamation, the prophet has a distinct question-and-answer method for making his argument. Malachi is likely a cultic prophet, that is, he did not ride into town railing at the power structure, instead, he was within the power structure already – most likely a temple priest. But he condemns the priestly brotherhood for corrupting worship and misleading the people. And Malachi's leading, dominating preaching theme, is fidelity to the Lord's covenant and its teaching. He is trying to bring the people of God back to taking seriously God's teachings – like tithing, giving 1/10 of everything you earn back to the house of God.

And, let's be clear. Tithing is one of those tenants he is preaching about. Our Stewardship Committee would not want me to miss this point. We are all called upon to bring our tithes into the storehouse to support our church and her ministries. Our efforts to spread the good news of God's love in Christ demand our financial support. I don't mean to soften the prophet's stern preaching about us getting more serious about our role in the covenant and its teachings. Nor do I want trouble with our Stewardship Committee, so please give as our covenant calling demands.

But, the disturbing part of the passage (okay, the command to give might actually be disturbing for some of us) but the part that causes me pause is Malachi's declaration that we bring the tithe to the storehouse and then, says the Lord, "*see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing*".

Doesn't that sound a little like the prosperity preachers? The truth is, this is not the only part of the Old Testament that seems to advance a *quid pro quo*, this-for-that, theology – a simple theology that suggests that if you do good you will get good. If you do bad, you will get bad. Consider these verses from Proverbs:

Proverbs 10:3 - "*The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.*"<sup>4</sup>

Really? I know several righteous hungry people and I have seen more than my share of wicked folks who drink Bollinger champagne from the decks of their yacht.

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<sup>4</sup> Proverbs 10: 3 NRSV

Proverbs 13: 4 - *“The appetite of the lazy craves, and gets nothing, while the appetite of the diligent is richly supplied.”*<sup>5</sup>

Well ... sometimes. But sometimes lazy people have plenty. I knew a trust-fund kid when we lived in North Carolina – early 30’s. No alarm clock – no job – no ambition and wads of money.

My point is that sometimes the Bible does advance a simple theology. No texture, no exceptions, no gray or nuance. But Proverbs, for instance, was written as a children’s primer. Short sentences, easy to memorize – and with the simple theology that we teach children. You wouldn’t complicate the simple good/bad, this or that, simplicity of childhood moral development by saying,

- *“Sometimes lazy people do just fine.”*
- *“Sometimes the righteous go hungry.”*
- *“Sometimes it is okay to touch the top of the stove because sometimes the burners are off.”*

No – we teach children more simply than that – the wisdom is not wrong; it is just offered up in its naivest form.

Proverbs is part of the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament – but so is Job. If Proverbs is elementary, Job is for graduate students in the faith. Proverbs says, *“The Lord does not let the righteous go hungry, but he thwarts the craving of the wicked.”*<sup>6</sup>

But in the Book of Job, Job is righteous, and everything falls apart in his life. Mature faith moves beyond the simple proverbs of childhood, though there is an honored place for the simple propositions that carry us toward more mature understanding.

Our relationship with the eternal God, is just that, it is relationship. It is not a formula. We trust in a God who always keeps the windows of heaven open, who always delivers and guides and rescues and forgives and shows mercy. We trust and give thanks that we never get what we deserve, but so much more.

It is not a formula – *“give and God will return 100-fold”*. This is not a transaction. Malachi also reports God as saying, *“I have loved you.”*<sup>7</sup> And, saying, *“for I the Lord do not change”*.<sup>8</sup> We

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<sup>5</sup> Proverbs 13: 4 NRSV

<sup>6</sup> Proverbs 10: 3 NRSV

<sup>7</sup> Malachi 1:2 NRSV

<sup>8</sup> Malachi 3:6 NRSV

live inside the covenant of God's unchanging love that never changes but love is never a *quid pro quo* – love is never a this-for-that trade or formula. Eventually, our simple theology grows up and we relish that God is not in the business of exchange but grace. We bounce and skip and delight in the truth that the windows of heaven are always open because we live in the abundance of grace.

The Prosperity Gospel proclaims that God rewards different levels of faith with greater amounts of wealth. If God were about rewarding the faithful with financial gain, then I don't suppose Jesus would have said to the rich young ruler,

- *“You lack one thing: go, sell all that you have and give to the poor; and you will have treasure in heaven; and come, follow me.”*<sup>9</sup>
- Or, that Jesus would have explained this exchange by telling his disciples, *“It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God.”*<sup>10</sup>
- The Apostle Paul, writing from a jail cell with chains around his ankles would probably have a thing or two to say about God blessing people with financial comfort if they are faithful enough.
- Jesus, you remember, was homeless. And, in Luke's Gospel Jesus said, *“Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head.”*<sup>11</sup>

Sometimes the scriptures do proclaim the simple propositions of an elementary faith. Malachi tells the unfaithful Jews who have been robbing God by ignoring the Lord's covenant and teachings, that they need to return to faithful giving and that God will care for them and bring healthy crops and keep the locusts away. It is a sturdy childlike maxim. But we grow. We grow to the glorious knowledge that we do not get what we deserve – thanks be to God! The windows of heaven are always open.

But we also grow in our faith to recognize that the journey of the faithful often leads down roads that are not paved with prosperity. Paul's faithfulness landed him in jail. Jesus' faithfulness kept him homeless and eventually took him to the indignities of the cross where his body and blood became the enduring symbols of our faith – not gold and silver.

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<sup>9</sup> Mark 10: 21 NRSV

<sup>10</sup> Mark 10: 25 NRSV

<sup>11</sup> Luke 9:58 NRSV

...the Lord Jesus on the night when he was betrayed took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it, and said, "This is my body which is for you. Do this in remembrance of me."

In the same way also the cup, after supper, saying, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood. Do this, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of me." For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes.