
Small Group Discussion Guide

Text: Malachi 3:6-12

Theme/ Big Idea: The Lord of Hosts reveals the hearts of Israel as fickle, half-hearted, and distrustful by addressing how they use their resources.

Context/ Background Information: Israel is fickle and half-hearted in their worship. In **verse 6**, God refers to Israel not as the children of Israel but the “children of Jacob,” the swindler and liar. By implication, they are a nation of swindlers and liars. Though they have always been unfaithful (**vs 7**) and should be crushed, the Lord of Hosts reminds them that he is always good, gracious, faithful, consistent, and benevolent. Therefore, he will remain faithful to the covenant of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (**vs 6**). Were he not a faithful God, the descendants of Jacob would have already been forsaken and destroyed long ago. Because of his faithfulness and unwavering commitment to the covenant the Lord of Hosts invites them to repent and return. Why? Because he is not finished with them yet (lit. has not consumed).

Israel responds, “Return? Who us? What have we done? How have we wandered? How have we strayed?” As Iain Duguid notes, “Israel is here playing the part of a child who, when told, “Put your boots on.” answers, “Where are thy?”—all the time knowing exactly where her boots are: right in front of her.”¹ God answers their question with a question, “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me” (**vs 8**). Like a good parent, God immediately responds with, “Stop it! You are shifty, heel grabbing, deceivers and you know exactly what you are doing!” In fact, the root Hebrew word can mean heel grabber and cheat. It is often translated as rob, cover over a truth, act falsely, or act covertly. Although not the same Hebrew word, the word translated as “faithless” in **Malachi 2:10-16** is nearly identical. What is the charge against Israel? They are fickle, swindlers constantly dealing falsely with God just like their swindling father Jacob.

Money is merely a symptom of Israel’s larger issue. God does not need or want their money, He wants their hearts. Instead of giving God their best, they are giving him what is left. Remember the type of offerings they were presenting in **Malachi 1**? Lame, mangled, and in some cases, dead sacrifices found in the field. There was no sacrifice in their sacrifice. God had given them everything and they were unwilling to give him even a tenth of their possessions. In this way, the tithe was a window into the spiritual decay of their heart.

The tithe was a command to set aside a tenth of their possessions as an act of worship (**Lev. 27:30**). The tithe was intended to be used for: 1) supporting the work of ministry and worship in the temple (**Ex. 29:27–28; Lev. 9:22; Num. 5:9, 18:21**), 2) meeting the needs of “widows, orphans and resident aliens,” (**Deut. 14:28–29**) and 3) funding the feasts and celebrations of God’s blessings (**Deut. 12:18; 14:23, 26**).² Yet in the face of crisis, inwardly they doubted God while outwardly they refused to give

their tithe. In a literal sense their actions were choking the life out of their own nation spiritually, economically, and physically.

The tithe was never meant to fund God. He had no need for their finances (**Deut 10:14; Job 41:11; Psalm 50:10-11**). Everything they gave was first his and was always intended to be turned back on them in blessing through the ministry of the priests, the ministry of benevolence, and the ministry of the feasts. However, because Israel stubbornly refused to give God what rightfully belonged to him: 1) the ministry of the temple was abdicated, responsibility was given to the Persian government, and their spiritual instructors and public worship were "silenced," 2) the weak and powerless were further oppressed and "cast aside" (**3:5**), and 3) the feasts and celebrations were diminished. Israel looked at the absence of these things and blamed God, when in fact it was their own fault.³ They had withheld God's resources and started to "finance [their] kingdom of self."⁴ The result was not blessing but curse (**vs 9**).

The tithe was always an act of obedience, worship, and trust. Just as the command issued in **Genesis 2:17** was an invitation to trust God, so too was the command to give a tenth of their possessions regardless of their circumstances. Instead, Israel mistakenly clung to their money falsely believing it was their source of security, safety, and comfort. In this way, the tithe served as a window into their hearts and what they trusted in most.

In light of their distrust of God and their hope in money, Malachi says, "Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need." Interestingly, the root of the Hebrew word for "test" is the same root for the word "refine." Remember what Malachi has already said in **Malachi 3:1-5**. There the Lord of Hosts said he would refine Israel. The implied inevitable result would be that nothing but dross would remain. But now God invites Israel to refine him. The implied inevitable result is that nothing but gold would remain. And what does God say he will do with the pure gold of his person and character? He will pour it out on them in blessing.

What is going on here? The Lord of Hosts is graciously asking, "Israel, won't you trust me?" He is revealing their pattern of living independently from himself. He is also reminding them that living this way results in crushing drought personally and spiritually. Instead, the Lord of Hosts invites them to find their fulfillment, hope, and joy in trusting him for their every need. And what will be the result? He will "rebuke the devourer" and crush their drought pouring out blessing in excess. The phrase "open the floodgates of heaven" or "open the windows of heaven" in **verse 11** is first used in **Genesis 7:11** when God opened the heavens and flooded the earth to excess during the great flood of Noah. God's protection and provision in excess will result in the watching world looking on in amazement and calling Israel blessed (**vs 11-12**).

Considering this text in light of the New Testament, what has God done for us? He has opened the door of heaven and poured out blessings to excess providing a savior in Jesus on the cross. "He did not hold back what he treasured most."⁵ Instead, he offered his greatest treasure, his only son, that we might be redeemed and reconciled through him. When the apostle Paul traveled to the churches of

Asia minor and Greece sharing the gospel and fundraising for the Jerusalem church and the famine crisis in Israel, he did not guilt those churches into giving. Rather, he simply reminded them of the gospel. In fact, he said that the churches of Macedonia, though they faced a crisis of their own, heard of the need in Jerusalem and 1) "gave according to their means," 2) "beyond their means, 3) "of their own accord," 4) "begging...earnestly for the favor of taking part in the relief of the saints" (**2 Co 8:3–5**). And what does Paul say was their motive for such an attitude and such giving? He says, for they knew "the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for [their] sake he became poor, so that [they] by his poverty might become rich" (**2 Co 8:9**). Why do we give today? It is certainly not to repay God. No, it is in glad response to all that he has lavished on us in Jesus. When rightly understood, the gospel makes us far more generous and open-handed with all that we are and all that we have. The gospel makes us far more generous with the good news of the gospel itself, as well as with our time, talents, and treasures. Why does the gospel, when rightly understood, make people radically generous? Because they have come to understand how radically generous God has been towards them in Christ.

Discussion Questions:

1. What does it mean to be called the children of Jacob? What did the name "Jacob" mean? What does it say about God that he remained faithful even to swindlers and liars like Israel?
2. What encouragement and/or hope is there in knowing that God is faithful and does not change despite your own fickleness and failure?
3. How does Israel rob God? How might their circumstances have tempted them to do this? Have you ever felt this way or been in this situation? Read Mark 12:41-44. Where is the woman's trust?
4. Read Luke 12:32-34. How could someone sell all their possessions and yet not be in fear?
5. Donald Whitney, author of *Spiritual Disciplines For The Christian Life* suggests tithing is a spiritual discipline. How might tithing be a healthy spiritual discipline?
6. Consider this quote by Tim Keller, "You always give most effortlessly to that which is your real salvation, your hope, your meaning in life." Do you agree or disagree? Based on this quote, what would your bank account say is your greatest hope or meaning?
7. Consider another quote by Keller, "The tithe is a minimum rule of thumb for Christians who want to give in a gospel way to the church, the poor, and others. But more basic than tithing is the guideline of sacrifice. If we have tithed and it doesn't cut in to the way we actually live, is it actually a sacrifice?" What are your thoughts on this quote? How does it challenge our typical approach to the subject of the tithe?

Worth Further Study:

- Neither Poverty nor Riches by Craig Blomberg
- Sex and Money: Pleasures That Leave You Empty and Grace That Satisfies by Paul Tripp

Footnotes:

- Iain Duiguid, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi: Reformed Expository Commentary (Phillipsburg, NJ, P&R Publishing, 2018), 162.
- Walter C. Kaiser and Lloyd J. Ogilvie, *Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi*, vol. 23, The Preacher's Commentary Series (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson Inc, 1992), 499.
- Duiguid, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi, 165.
- Paul Tripp. Sex and Money: Pleasures That Leave You Empty and Grace That Satisfies, (Wheaton, IL, Crossway, 2013), 155.
- Duiguid, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Malachi, 171.