

“The Audacity of Nope!”
Malachi 3:6-12

⁶ “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers 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?’ ⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹ You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. ¹² Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (ESV)

We’re in the second week of a three-week series on Stewardship. What does it mean to be a good steward in God’s kingdom? Last week we looked at Deuteronomy, and in Deuteronomy we learned among other things, that God owns everything. We become sort of self-righteous about that. God came back to Israel and said, “Even the ability to earn anything came from me.” So this morning we’re going to take a look at it from a different angle.

I read a great story this week about Ivan the Terrible. Or, depending on which side of his sword you were on, you called him “Ivan the Great.” But, either way, Ivan was his name. Ivan the Terrible was the czar in Russia in the early part of the sixteenth century. He is responsible for what we now know as the former Soviet Union. All of that came from him. He was basically a warrior and a plunderer and a pillager and a tough guy. At some point his advisors came up to him and said, “Ivan, you need a wife.” He said, “You know, I don’t have time for a wife. I have pillaging to do.” They said, “No, you need a wife so you can have an heir eventually.” He said, “Okay. You guys find me a wife and whoever you find I’m sure she will be fine. Let me know when you’ve got one.” That’s pretty hard-core, right? So the guys go and find a wife, and they come back and say, “Ivan, we have good news and we have bad news. The good news is that we found you a wife. She’s a princess, her father is the king of Greece, and she’s very beautiful. That’s the good news. The bad news is you can’t marry her unless you’re willing to be baptized into the Greek Orthodox Church.” Ivan said, “What’s a little water? That’s fine.” It didn’t really matter. So he agreed to that and the king of Greece sent tutors up to tutor Ivan in the doctrine of the Greek Orthodox Church. Ivan made his elite force of 500 warriors—sort of like his Rangers, or Seals, or something—also take these classes and are baptized with him. So they take the Discovery Class (if you will) from the Greek Orthodox Church. They go down to Greece and are going to be baptized in the Mediterranean Sea. Of course, thousands of people came out to see Ivan the Terrible and these 500 warriors be baptized in the Mediterranean. Just as they were getting ready to begin the ceremony a priest brought up another glitch. He said, “You know, we have a problem here – I was just thinking about it. You can’t be a man of war and also be a member of the Greek Orthodox Church. What are we going to do about this? So, they had a little confab, did a little politicking and came up with the perfect solution. They baptized by immersion, so as each soldier went into the water, right before the priest was going to immerse and baptize him, the soldier would draw his sword and hold it above his head. The priest would then immerse everything – his whole body except for the sword. That came to be known as “the unbaptized arm.” You don’t want to face the unbaptized arm of Ivan’s troops. Pretty cool, huh?

The question is, “What does that have to do with us and the issue of stewardship?” The issue is that according to every data since they’ve been recording data, most Christians have an unbaptized arm. Do you know which arm that is? I can show it to you. It’s this one right here. [reaching into his pants pocket and pulling out his wallet] Right? Since they’ve been recording data, the average evangelical gives about two percent of their income, or a little bit more, sometimes a little bit less. That’s from the early part of this century up to this point. So, the question is, “Why is that such a big deal? Why is it always that way? Why are evangelicals, generally speaking (there are some instances where people are very generous), so ungenerous as a people?

If it makes you feel any better, it’s always been a problem in the church. Martin Luther, who also lived in the sixteenth century, made this comment. He said, “When someone becomes a Christian there are three conversions that have to take place. First is the conversion of their head. Second is the conversion of their heart. The third is the conversion of their wallet.” It’s always been a problem. Not only has it always been a problem in the West and in Europe, it’s been a problem that goes all the way back to the Old Testament. Even in the Old Testament Israel struggled with the same issue as well. Are we generous? The problem is that your generosity and the outworking of your generosity are maybe the prime way for you to understand how well you understand the Gospel. It’s a symptom of everything else that is in your heart. So in today’s text we’re basically going to look at a snapshot of Israel struggling with the same issue that most Christians struggle with as well.

We’re looking at the Book of Malachi. Just to give you some context, in the Book of Malachi, Israel was in Babylon and were in exile, and Ezekiel and Haggai encouraged them to go back to Israel and rebuild the temple. They said, “When you do these things then God will come and bless you and send the Messiah to you.” And they did. They went back, many of them to Jerusalem. They rebuilt the temple, and then they fell on hard economic times and didn’t feel blessed and the

Messiah didn't show up. So what do Israelites and Christians do when God does not immediately meet their expectations? We complain! They complained. So, they began to complain that God had changed His mind. "God, You promised You were going to bring us back to Jerusalem and You were going to bless us and prosper us and here we are in a down economic time. The elders are passing TARP bills everywhere, I don't know what's going on, and You're nowhere to be found. And on top of that, where's the Messiah?" You have to be careful. If you argue with God, the thing that you risk is Him talking back. That's what the Book of Malachi is all about. The whole Book of Malachi at some level is about stewardship.

When you read the prophets, something to keep in mind: it helps you to understand that most of the prophets are actually legal disputations. They're lawsuits. They're lawsuits that God is prosecuting, using the prophet as a prosecutor. In other words, the prophet comes and says, "Thus saith the Lord" and he makes an accusation, then people may or may not defend themselves. Then God comes back because He is judge, jury, and unfortunately sometimes executioner in the Old Testament. There are five issues in the Book of Malachi that are prosecuted, that God brings up against them. I'm going to give you those quickly, because the fifth one is really the lynchpin of all of them. The first one is just this: you have priests that were abusing their power. You have bogus priests, and among other things, they were not presenting to God the first fruits. Their job was to take animals that were without blemish and without spot and present them as sacrifice. The priests basically were not. They were taking animals that were lame and weak in order to save the good things for themselves. So, you had bad priests. The second problem they had is if you had bad priests you're going to have lame worship or bad worship. Their worship services were not glorifying to God. God had something to say about that to them. The third thing was that they were unfaithful in their marriages. Divorce apparently had been running rampant and God steps in and says, "You be faithful to that covenant. To the wife of your youth be faithful." God is very uptight about that particular issue. The fourth issue is the issue of social justice. He tells them, "You have forgotten to take care of the widow and the orphan and the sojourner," which in our case might be the homeless. So then, at that point, Israel decides they're going to say something back. They're going to try and defend themselves. They're going to talk. That's where we're going to jump into today's text. We're really going to look at two things this morning. We're going to look at an invitation to repentance. The second is an offering of blessing. Let me read to you the first few verses here.

⁶ *"For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷ From the days of your fathers 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. . . (ESV)*

Remember the accusation is that God has changed on us. He's not faithful to His promises. He said He was going to do this and now He's not doing that, so God must be mutable, He changes. God basically steps in and says, "Nope. You got it wrong. Here's the problem. The problem is not that I the Lord changed because I the Lord never change. The problem is that you the people never change." God doesn't change, but we are called to change. God said, "The problem here is not the fact that I don't change. The problem is that you don't change. From the time of your fathers until now you have failed to live up to my statutes." In other words, "From the day I brought you out of Egypt, you've done nothing but complain. I delivered you from the land of Egypt, I brought you into the Promised Land. You went into exile and I brought you back. No matter what I do apparently it isn't good enough for you. You're an ungrateful people. You complain. You don't get it." So God said, "That's the problem." Then He invites them to repent. He says, "Return to me and I will return to you." What does He mean by that? The word in Hebrew is also "repent." If you repent, I'll repent, because they were calling on God to change. What does it mean to repent? You've heard it from me a number of times. Basically repentance means to stop doing the bad thing and to start doing the good thing. That's one definition. Stop heading in the direction that's harmful to you and start heading in the direction that's beneficial to you. But also repentance means, "coming home." That's what God says. "Return to Me and I will return to you."

What was their problem? They thought they were doing everything right. They were going through the motions just like many Christians do. They probably went to church. We know that they gave something or else the temple wouldn't have been able to be built. We know that they were engaging in worship somehow even if it was bogus. They were doing some things; they were going through the motions. God says, "Return to me and I'll return to you." So, they make the mistake of asking God, "How shall we return?" Then what God says to them had to be shocking to them. When you talk to most religious people, when they talk about repentance they want to know, "Tell me what I need to do to be good. What do I need to do? Do you want me to read my Bible more? I'll do it. You want me to go to church more often? I'll do it. You want me to go to evening service, too? Got it. Just tell me what to do and I'll do it and I'll check it off the list." What God says here has to have rocked their world. Notice what He says.

⁷ . . . *But you say, 'How shall we return?' ⁸ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions. (ESV)*

So God answers their question with a question. "How shall we return? Will a man rob God?" Then he makes an accusation. "You've robbed me." That's a big accusation because stealing is one of the Ten Commandments. It's one thing to steal from another person but God says to them, "You have actually been stealing from me." The word there would be better translated

“defraud or embezzle.” Why would that be a better word? Because remember who owns the stuff in the first place. It’s not that God has stuff over the hill and you go and take it from Him. Everything He’s given you is His. He owns it and we’re called to manage it or be stewards of it. He says, “You have embezzled. You’ve held back.” They said, “How have we robbed you? That’s the craziest thing I’ve ever heard in my life.” He says, “By withholding your tithes and your offerings.” For them, tithes and offerings were the law. It was something to literally be obeyed. A tithe, if you’re not familiar with the term, means a tenth. Sometimes they had to give a tenth twice a year. Sometimes their giving was demanded and lawful up to about twenty-six percent. God says, “You’ve withheld from me. What’s the result of you withholding from me?” It’s scary. Notice what He says.

⁸ . . . *In your tithes and contributions.* ⁹ *You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. (ESV)*

Now the question is, “Are they cursed because they didn’t give or are they not giving because they’re cursed?” Probably both. He says, “You’re under a curse. You’ve withheld from me and you’re under a curse, the whole nation of you.” Unless you think it’s just cause and effect, it’s bigger than their giving because we’re all under a curse from the very beginning, from the time Adam and Eve ate of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil. Every one in here, every person of us, not just them but us, we’re all guilty of robbing God. Some of you are right now may be feeling convicted about your giving. “Am I robbing God? Am I giving? I don’t know.” Let me pour some salt into that. All of us rob God when we don’t give Him the honor due His name. We’re stealing from Him. We’re guilty of robbery of God when we don’t give Him the glory due His name. We’re guilty of robbing God when we don’t give Him the obedience that is due His name. So whether you’re generous or not, all of us are under this curse called sin. Is there any hope from people who are under a curse? Fortunately, there is. This guy named Jesus, who in the wise providence of God and in a twist of irony, happened to have been crucified between two thieves. Think about that. All of us are under a curse, and the only way to get out from under that curse is to find someone else who will bear that curse for you. The Gospel says this: Jesus came and bore the curse for you and for me, the curse we deserve for robbing God, not just of our finances but from everything else. Jesus bore the penalty of the one who would rob God so that you and I might be people who are generous toward God. Where does that leave you?

When they say, “What have we done?” and He says, “Tithe.” and they say, “What do you want us to do now?” God could have just told them what to do and left it at that. But what God tells them, He attaches a promise to it. The first thing is an invitation to repentance. Will you repent? Will you turn from your sin and come to the cross? Will you come home? Will you come to the one named Jesus Who took your sin from you? The beauty of the Gospel is that every call to repentance also has attached to it a promise and an offering. That’s where Malachi goes next. God invites them to repent, to return to God but then He tells them that He offers them this blessing. What’s the offering of blessing? Let me read it to you.

¹⁰ *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. (ESV)*

What does He tell them to do? When they said, “How shall we return?” He could have said, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse” period. He’s God, He makes the demands, He makes the laws. You bring it into the storehouse. Good. You don’t bring it into the storehouse. Bad. He could have stopped there, but He doesn’t. What does He do instead? He says, “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse so that there may be food in my house.” Remember the purpose of the tithe in the Old Testament was to care for the priests and for those who were poor. Even the priests had to give a tithe of what was tithed to them. God says, “Bring that whole thing in.” And then He says, “Prove me.” Usually you get in trouble for testing God. Yet, here we’re actually encouraged to. He says, “Test me in this. Bring the whole thing in and test me in this, and see if I don’t pour down such blessing upon you that you cannot contain it.” Giving at some level, on one hand, derives from our gratitude. We look at the cross and see Jesus did everything for me. But also, at the end of the day, stewardship is an act of faith. God says to Israel in this part, “Test me in this. Test me. Bring the whole thing in and see if I don’t bless you.” You know what? I’ve been in church for twenty years now and I’ve never met, not one time, a Christian who tithed and felt like they did the wrong thing. I’ve never met a Christian that tithed and not only did they not regret it, but who didn’t feel blessed as a result. Not one time. In fact some of the wealthiest people I’ve ever met are also among the most generous. I know some of you are out there thinking, “Of course they’re generous because they have a lot of money.” In my experience, most of the time they actually have a lot of money, it seems, because they’re so generous. They were generous when they didn’t have much money and then when they have a lot of money they’re just as generous. The issue is that they’re generous. God is saying to these folks in Malachi, that it’s not cause and effect. “If you plant the faith seed I promise you I’ll give you money for it.” That’s not how it works. How it works is that we are stewards of everything God has given us. And common sense would tell you that if God is in the business of seeing people won for Christ and He’s in the business of seeing people taken care of and seeing the poor ministered to, and the widow and the orphan taken care of, and people won for the Gospel, is He going to give more resources to people who are generous with it or people who are not generous with it? It’s common sense. He says when you give like this, if you would just tithe, He’s going to pour out so much blessing you wouldn’t know what to do with it. Does that mean if you’re generous that God is going to bless you financially? Is it really cause and effect? Not necessarily. But there are lots of other blessings that come along with being generous.

Two hundred and ten members, I think, took those surveys last week, and I thank you very much for that because it was helpful. I only have one piece of data because my human calculator was out of town this week. So I have to pick his brain this week. Do you remember last week I told you that the median income in the United States was about \$50,000 plus or minus? Well, from about one-half that filled out those surveys, the median income in our church is about \$75,000. So we're \$25,000 above what the national average is. What does that mean? The number Ron taught me is that if half of the membership of our church tithed, just half tithed, our budget this year would be \$3 million, not \$1½ million. What that tells you is since we struggle to make \$1½ million, not even one-half of the people are giving like that. But, think of the blessing that would come from that kind of generosity. Many people worry about the mortgage on this building. With that kind of generosity that mortgage would be gone in a couple of years. Missionaries wouldn't have to go around in a station wagon all over the country, begging people to give them \$50 here or there. There are tremendous blessings that come along with that.

Here's the big question, "Should Christians tithe? Are Christians commanded to tithe?" Here's the answer. It's going to surprise you. No, you're not. I can't read this passage to you and say, "Look what God said to Israel. You tithe and I will bless you" because in the New Testament you don't find tithing any place. To that point I can't even ask you to tithe. A lot of Christians say, "How much do I have to give?" Or, "Should I tithe?" The issue with the New Testament is that everything in the New Testament gets bigger and better. Everything in the New Testament builds upon the Old Testament and so in the Old Testament the standard was the tithe, ten percent. Do you know what the standard is in the New Testament? If you said one hundred, you're right. The question in the New Testament is not, "How much do I have to give?" The question in the New Testament is, "How much should I keep?" Everything is God's, and look at what Jesus has done for me, and look at what He's doing in the world. How much should I keep so the people don't think I'm crazy? How much can I give away? If you want to know where I got that from besides II Corinthians 8 and 9, there are lots of passages. But, I was thinking about it this week. What is the standard of the Christian life? What is the goal to which we all strive? The goal that we're all striving toward is to become more and more like Jesus, is it not? Theologians call it sanctification. A few years ago the bracelets "WWJD" were all the rage. "What Would Jesus Do?" You ask the question, "What would Jesus do?" Apparently people asked that question of everything but their generosity. When you ask the question of generosity, "What would Jesus do?" The number you come up with every time is a hundred percent. God spared absolutely no expense to win us. Then He asks us now and actually gives us the privilege of participating in the ministry to win other people. The question is, "Will you do it?" For some of you it's difficult to even conceive of that because of where you are financially, and that's something you have to think about. We have classes coming up.

One of the things that's a pet peeve of mine: whenever my daughter Abby and I watch the Mariners a lot, and there and in the Olympics, and reporters talk to a player and say, "What are you going to do today?" And they always say, "I'm going to give 110%." That just irks me because I was an English major, but even I know that it's an impossibility to give more than 100%. It's either 100% or it's not. It's crazy to talk about 110%. But, I was doing some reading this week that was interesting. It's impossible to give more than 100% but it's not impossible to spend more than 100%. I read a figure this week by Howard Dayton. He founded "Crown Financial Ministries." Apparently 43% of Americans, including those in the church, spend at least 10% more than their income every month. Can you be generous if you're actually spending more than you make? You can't. For some of you this is new and for some of you it's convicting.

I'm going to close with this. I'm going to remind you of what I talked to you about last year because no one ever remembers what preachers say. That's the "Skittle Principle." If you want to feel better about your generosity, always remember the "Skittle Principle." Do you remember it? Most of you? Some? OK, a few righteous people. The "Skittle Principle" is just this: I took the girls last week to see, "Wolverine: X-men Origins." You go to the movies and you tell the girls you're going to be a great dad that week. "We're going to go to a full-price movie, not the \$2 movie. So you take them there and realize, among other things, that although your twelve-year-old is not an adult, you have to pay full price for them. So you lay down the money and it costs you \$50 just to walk through the door. You go through the door and you say, "I'm going to do it all up this time" and you go to the concession stand and you get the two-liter Coke thing and you get the 55-gallon drum of popcorn, and you get the box of Skittles that you have to carry with a handcart. The parent usually doesn't get anything for themselves. Why? You think, "I just bought 50 pounds of food for the kids." You get into the theater. The previews are coming on, and you whisper over to one of your kids, "Hey. Give me some Skittles." You put your hand out and they reach over and give you one Skittle. One Skittle. You just drove them to the movies, you just paid \$50 to walk in the door, you paid another \$30 for popcorn, Coke and Skittles, and when you ask for some Skittles what do you get? One. My kids don't do that anymore because it's embarrassing when your father makes a scene in the middle of a movie. "Hey. I paid for those Skittles. I'll eat the whole box if I want to." But the fact is, when you think about the Gospel and you think about what's going on, God has given you and me 100% of everything that we have. He's given it to us. When He calls us to be generous He's not being crazy, He's not saying, "I'm going to mess with them. I'm going to give them this much and I'm going to take it away." What He's saying is, "Hey, how about you give me some Skittles? Because, all I'm going to do is give them to someone else anyway, but I'm going to see if you'll give them to me." The question is, "Are you going to give them or not?" In the context of that story it's pretty crazy not to, isn't it? Seems crazy. Think about that.