

Malachi 3:1-18 A Call for Spiritual Investment

Introduction

Galatians 6:7-9 reminds us about the biblical policy of spiritual investment: *Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows.*⁸ *The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life.*⁹ *Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.* In 1928 a small congregation in down-town Toronto was formed. Shortly afterwards possibly, 1929 or 1930, the young pastor Oswald J Smith was leading Sunday worship in an overseas mission focus week. It was the time for the offering. Unknown to the pastor a man in the congregation wrote some words on an envelope and handed it to the pastor – not a normal practice. The man had written ‘In dependence on God I will endeavour to give \$_____ towards the missionary work of this church in the coming year.’ It was a generous sum given his income and at the time of the Great Depression. Without mentioning the sum the pastor, I understand, asked the congregation to consider putting the Lord first in their finances and trust Him to provide the blessing. The first overseas missionaries from that church were commissioned in 1936 and the Lord added to that number in later years. The small church grew in the next few decades to several thousand strong and became known around the world as one of the foremost supporters of world mission. According to its website this month, this 3,500 strong cause supports in varying degrees 153 national workers in different countries and 300 foreign missionaries. It is the principle of spiritual investment. God honours those that honour Him. One of Oswald Smith’s memorable sayings was this: Give according to your income lest God make your income according to your giving’. You may need to think about that one! However, in terms of principles this is incredibly biblical. Investing our resources in God’s work is the best investment policy we can have. Our passage today is from the Old Testament, but it is teaching truths that are equally evident in the New Testament. Jesus in Matthew 6:19-21 made a similar point: *Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy, and where thieves break in and steal.*²⁰ *But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not destroy, and where thieves do not break in and steal.*²¹ ***For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.*** In Malachi’s day, in a time of economic uncertainty it appeared that God’s people in Israel were cutting back on their investment in God’s kingdom and as a result forfeiting the blessings He had planned for them. The implication for future generations of God’s people is that a similar challenge must be overcome when the pressures are on us to give less to God’s work than He has laid on our hearts to give.

1. A Call to Return (Malachi 3:1-7)

(a) **The Old Testament principles of giving in Judaism** The first example is seen in the life of Abraham in Genesis 14 where, after the extraordinary victory of his makeshift guerrilla army had defeated a much larger force of invading kings, the patriarch chose to celebrate the triumph with a service of worship. Although there is much we will never know about Melchizedek, the passage indicates that there were prayers of praise, the offering of bread and wine in the service, together with the offering in which Abraham chose to donate a tithe of his income to the Lord’s work. This practice was continued by his family. In Genesis 28:22 Jacob as a young man made a promise to God that out of his future income *I will give You a tenth.* The guideline given to the Israelites when they entered the land followed along these lines. Leviticus 27:30 states: *A tithe of everything from the land, whether grain from the soil or fruit from the trees, belongs to the Lord...The entire tenth of the herd and flock...will be holy to the Lord (v32)...These are the commands the Lord gave Moses on mount Sinai for*

the Israelites (v34). In their worship services the Levites were told: *You will also present an offering to the Lord from all the tithes you receive from the Israelites* (Numbers 18:28). The tithes of the food would be used to provide for the basic necessities of the poorest people, the asylum seekers, widows and orphans, who had no means to produce their own food or provide an income for themselves (Deuteronomy 14: 28-29). When the tithes were not paid in full it was the most vulnerable in Israeli society that suffered the most, hence the warnings of the prophets not to neglect this ministry. There were also offerings made for additional purposes. Exodus 29:27-28 [see also Leviticus 7:32 and Numbers 5:9;] speaks of the fellowship offering to provide for Aaron and his sons who served as the priests. Exodus 25:1-7 described the voluntary practical gifts for the construction of the Tabernacle and its furnishings. Nehemiah 13:10-13 described the collection of the support for the Levites who assisted the priests in their work at the Temple: *I also learned that **the portions assigned to the Levites had not been given to them, and that all the Levites and singers responsible for the service had gone back to their own fields.**¹¹ So I rebuked the officials and asked them, **Why is the house of God neglected?** Then I called them together and stationed them at their posts.¹² All Judah brought the tithes of grain, new wine and oil into the storerooms.¹³ I put Shelemiah the priest, Zadok the scribe, and a Levite named Pedaiah in charge of the storerooms and made Hanan son of Zaccur, the son of Mattaniah, their assistant, because these men were considered trustworthy. They were made responsible **for distributing the supplies to their brothers.** There is here a clear pattern running through the Old Testament of the Jewish people bringing their tithes and offerings for God's Work from Abraham onwards. It was a pattern that would go on to be assumed in the New Testament people of God as well.*

(b) **The problems experienced in Malachi's day** (Malachi 3:1-5)

¹ *See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come, says the Lord Almighty.*² *But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.*³ *He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness,*⁴ *and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.*⁵ *So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud labourers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty.*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?'* God is coming to judge His people, says the prophet, and expects a return to practising the standards He has laid down. Malachi, writing his messages and proclaiming God's truth after the return from exile, notes that there has been a pattern of violating God's commandments even amongst His own people. His book lists the many violations of God's laws, by His people –he is not interested in the violations of the unbelievers as they do not profess to love the Lord. Their offerings of animals that were not fit for purpose; God's standards were not taught with clarity, possibly out of fear of the reaction from the people; God's moral laws regarding marriage and family life were being ignored and easy divorces were making a mockery of marriage promises. Industrial relations were at an all-time low with the lowest paid workers vulnerable to reduced or non-payment of their wages. Once again people on the margins of society were suffering the most and asylum-seekers were being denied justice. In times of economic hardship in the land racism was rearing its ugly head and calls to focus on providing for the people who can shout the loudest were increasingly being heard. Does this sound familiar to life in Britain in the 21st century? I think so! The economic cycles will go through their various phases, but the priorities of God's people do not change. He gets the first call on our resources; we have responsibilities for our own needs and those of our families, but must always also be open to assisting the most

vulnerable in their times of need. In social and economic terms the message of the Old and New Testament shows great continuity over the centuries. In each generation, though we need to remind ourselves that our values will have some clear differences from those of some of our fellow citizens. Where we do share good moral principles in common let's work together for the common good, but where our standards depart from contemporary priorities may we not be intimidated into silence, forgetting that God's laws were put in place for the common good of society, not just for the wellbeing of committed believers. A society that operates in God's way is significantly better off than one that does what is right in its own eyes.

2. A Conviction for Robbery (Malachi 3:6-9, 13-15)

(a) The highlighted characteristic of God (Malachi 3:6) *I the Lord do not change*. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Geoffrey Grogan, the recently deceased former Principal of the Bible Training Institute, Glasgow, recalled an encounter he had on a bus journey in the late 1960s with a Roman Catholic priest. The man in question was recovering from a nervous breakdown. The cause of his health problem was unrelated to his work. The issue for him was the changes brought about in his church at the Second Vatican Council. He had been (wrongly) convinced that his church had never changed anything over the centuries, especially in its theological beliefs. This was the ground of his security –which had now been indisputably taken away. However, he needed to look up to an authority higher than his denomination to the One who Malachi says does not change. God's characteristics remain the same from eternity to eternity. His promises will be keep for ever. We let Him down, but He never turns His back on us. In fact the unchangeableness of God is pastorally important. In Malachi 3:6 we read *I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed*. Each and every one of us has had to say sorry at some time or other because we have made mistakes. Yet God never needs to do that because He never fails. God's promises to stand by His people and bring us home one day to our eternal rest with Him is secure; Our weak love for Him is at times embarrassing, but His grace is available to meet all our needs. Our desire to honour the Lord in each area of our lives is not based on fear of His punishments rather out of a heartfelt desire to respond appropriately to one who in Christ has given His very best for us. No wonder Paul, in Romans 8:31-33, can state these words of real assurance and joy: *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us?³² He who did not spare His own Son, but gave Him up for us all— how will He not also, along with Him, graciously give us all things?³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. For the Jewish believer the Old Covenant promises of God were wonderful and a delight. Jeremiah declared: *The time is coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah.³² It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them, declares the Lord.³³ This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time, declares the Lord. I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God, and they will be my people.³⁴ No longer will a man teach his neighbour, or a man his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' because they will all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord. For I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more* (Jeremiah 31:31-34). This prophetic declaration was fulfilled in Jesus. Each time we celebrate communion we read or hear these words from I Corinthians 11:25: *This cup is the new covenant in My blood; do this, whenever you drink it, in remembrance of Me*. In the light of the faithfulness of God this makes our sinful ways even more embarrassing and should place within our hearts a greater desire to want to live more closely to our Saviour.*

(b)**The charge laid by God** (Malachi 3:7-9) 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? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' In tithes and offerings.*⁹ *You are under a curse— the whole nation of you— because you are robbing me.* This was a most serious charge to level against anyone. When God brings such a charge against some of His people it is even more serious than accusations from other human beings. This is an exceedingly comprehensive charge sheet. We have all been aware of items on the news when someone has been convicted of maybe half a dozen offences and asked for another ninety or even more to be 'taken into consideration', at the time of sentencing. Yet how often the sentence imposed appears to be incredibly lenient for the damage caused by that person's wrongdoing. Here God invites us in our failures to return to fellowship with Him or to gain greater and deeper communion with Him as we obey His commandments and observe His decrees. Are there things this morning that the Lord has placed on your heart in recent weeks, but you have yet to do anything about it? God's invitation to you is to heed the voice of His Spirit in your mind and put into practice the way He has called you to go. The specific charge in this chapter was the failure of God's people to invest their tithes and offerings in God's Work. In those economically challenged times the resources given to it had been reduced inappropriately. Instead of trusting in God's provision some of these people had made some wrong choices with their finances. Fast forward 2,500 years we too face uncertain times –what will the Lord say to us? We rejoice in the blessings received in this church and the investment faithfully given by God's people over many years, but it is our responsibility to give in faith for the future work of His Church in this community in the present and future days. There is the temptation we can all face not to give our tithes and offerings to our local church or the other mission causes at home or overseas that we support; just as there is pressure on the current Coalition Government to cut back on International Aid at the present time. It is ironic in the New Testament that the most generous congregations faced the toughest socio-economic circumstances. In proportion to income the poor Macedonians gave vastly more than the Corinthians and it is possible that in cash terms they gave more as well to support Paul which was remarkable. How did Paul describe these Christians? *And now, brothers, we want you to know about the grace that God has given the Macedonian churches.*² *Out of the most severe trial, their overflowing joy and their extreme poverty welled up in rich generosity.*³ *For I testify that they gave as much as they were able, and even beyond their ability. Entirely on their own,*⁴ *they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this service to the saints.*⁵ *And they did not do as we expected, but they gave themselves first to the Lord and then to us in keeping with God's will* (II Corinthians 8:1-5). The Corinthians, on the whole had not got into the discipline of planned giving. For them, paid weekly, Paul gave this advice: *Now about the collection for God's people: Do what I told the Galatian churches to do.*² *On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made* (I Corinthians 16:1-2). For most of us paid monthly we can budget ahead of time for our various commitments; using standing orders or direct debits to pay for them. In giving to charitable causes, like the church, we can also significantly increase our giving by gift aid. However, planned giving is wiser giving and more sensible stewardship of the resources He has entrusted to us. Our model for giving is the Lord Jesus who gave His life for us-so we can never outgive Him. Some Christians today claim that because we are living under grace not law we are not required to give tithes and offerings, with the implication that they can get away with giving a lesser percentage of their income to the Lord's work. But this is completely at variance with the mindset of Jesus and New Testament principles. Paul expresses it this way in II Corinthians 9:6-7: *Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.*⁷ *Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful*

giver; In essence, God asks us to give of our finances, time and abilities to His work as we would want Him to respond to our prayers and requests. May the Lord help us to reflect His generous nature in our commitment to financial giving and our other forms of Christian ministry.

(c) The challenge to the mindset of God's people

¹³ *You have said harsh things against me, says the Lord. Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?'* ¹⁴ *You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty?'* ¹⁵ *But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.'* Why should I bother? In my workplace to do the full shift when others start late and leave early or do less work than I do? Why should I be honest with my tax returns when some 'other people' will try to get away with as much as they can? Why should I offer to do all kinds of duties in the church when 'x' or 'y' may have more time and energy than me, but rarely offers to do....? In every area of life we can raise our questions and wonder about the futility of it all. The book of Ecclesiastes in the Old Testament seems to focus on that kind of questioning. We all recognise that in this world some evil people do prosper at the expense of good people. There are numerous situations where life is anything but fair. Yet as God's people we need to learn to trust our heavenly Father, that He knows what He is doing and like a young child with a parent (parents) place our complete trust in Him. We cannot right all the wrongs in the world-but maybe this week you might make a difference in one person's life? Our vision is to change the world one person at a time. Instead of focussing on the things we cannot accomplish, think instead of what we can do and these little things over time can add up to something of real significance. In this immediate context the issue is the use of our finances. Will we honour the Lord by committing to His work our tithes and offerings? If this is an area of your Christian discipleship that you have never seriously thought through then take the time to address it as you may have been missing blessings God has for you as you engage in honouring Him with this ministry of giving. It may be only part of what we give to the Lord, but in a materialistic culture it is easy to have misplaced priorities regarding the appropriate use of the financial resources entrusted to our care.

3. A Comprehensive Reward (Malachi 3:10-12, 16-18)

In this final section of the chapter is God's action plan for His people. He will give them a proposition and explain the implications of taking on this course of action.

(a) **The requirement of obedience** (Malachi 3:10a) *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.* Will we obey this call from God. Do we trust Him for the provision of our own needs from what remains of our income if we guarantee to give His work this proportion of our monthly or weekly income?

(b) **The test of obedience** (Malachi 3:10b) *Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty,* It appears that some of these people were sceptical that it would 'work'. Charles Spurgeon, the most prominent and most successful Baptist minister in 19th century England once said: 'It is proven by all observation that success in the Lord's service is very generally in proportion to faith. It is certainly not in proportion to ability, nor does it always run parallel to a display of zeal; but it is invariably according to the measure of faith, for this is a law of the kingdom [of God] without exception, 'According to your faith be it unto you' [C.H. Spurgeon, *An All Round Ministry* chapter 3]. In almost every area of church life we must exercise faith to believe that what we are doing for the Lord will make a difference. I believe that it does for the glory of God. Numerous examples over church history prove this in practice –the question is will we add our names to the roll-call of people who will live by faith and expect to see God at work, in response to our trust exercised in Him?

(c) **The reward of obedience** (Malachi 3:10c-11) *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.* God promises to honour those that honour Him. For these people the practical visible application would be in the crop yields in their fields. This is not a pressing issue for us in a different cultural context! However, the principle here is that God guarantees to meet all the needs of the men and women and younger people who place their faith and trust in Him. In that context there was a material reward, normally in the New Testament era there is a spiritual reward, but notwithstanding that fact, it may not exclude the provision of all our material needs, sometimes in an extraordinary way. Some years ago I had a discussion with an academic scholar who was not a professing believer about the bulletins of answered prayers issued by the great Scottish social reformer William Quarrier. It was a wonderful opportunity to explain that if you assume the existence of God and accept that He has the attributes the Bible records and recognise the significance of prayer to God, then it is not too difficult to see how such things might result when God's people take prayer seriously. I have no idea about the long-term consequences of that conversation, but all I can say is that although there are prayers we will pray that will be answered in different ways to what we desire –God does answer our prayers. If we fail to trust Him and honour His calls to obedience the Bible is clear that we will miss out on the blessings He has in store for us. Will you take this step of faith in this area of your Christian discipleship –if you haven't taken it already?

(d) **The result of obedience** (Malachi 3:12, 16-18)¹² *Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty.¹⁶ Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name. ¹⁷ They will be mine, says the Lord Almighty, in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.¹⁸ And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.* Blessings are personal and they are collective. Nations that live righteously will be blessed by God. Here in the Old Testament the primary reference was to Israel and her conduct, but it is by application relevant to other nations as well. Our nation that has largely turned its back on God and His standards has no right to expect anything but judgement from Him. When churches do likewise they can only expect the same. There is a powerful promise given by the Lord to King Solomon in II Chronicles 7:14: *If My people, who are called by My name, will humble themselves and pray and seek My face and turn from their wicked ways, then will I hear from heaven and will forgive their sin and will heal their land.* Revival and renewal begin with individuals, you and me – will we put the Lord first in each area of our lives? In this passage in Malachi the particular problem was over the use of finances by God's people –may He help each one of us to wholeheartedly engage in spiritual investment of the resources entrusted to us, for the glory of His name's sake, Amen.