

January 21/22, 2006

Test Me Now in This

Malachi 1:6-14; 3:7-10

Pastor Bryan Clark

If you are visiting with us this morning, you've probably figured it out: Yes, we're talking about money today. We are in a stewardship series that ends today. Next week we'll be returning to our study in the Book of Acts.

Obviously people have strange ideas about God and money, and we'll talk more about that in a little bit. I just want to bring your attention to a couple of inserts that are in the bulletin that specifically have to do with stewardship. From time to time, people have asked if we offer electronic fund transfer, and the answer is yes. There is an insert giving details if you're interested in that.

Also, two weeks ago I asked you to read through the pledge card, and if you aren't currently part of our campaign, to just be thinking and praying about that and getting familiar with the card. After this morning, I would ask you to prayerfully consider turning in a pledge card and being a part of that. The card is fairly self-explanatory. We are asking for people to make a three-year commitment to the campaign.

A couple of things about the card: Some of you come from churches where if you turn in a pledge card and you don't fulfill your pledge, they come knocking. I can assure you that is not the point of the card; we would never do that. Frankly, we don't even know if you're anywhere close to fulfilling your pledge. Nobody tracks that. The card is meant to be a tool for you that encourages you to prayerfully consider what God would have you to give. This is just our reminder to do that. The reason we have the card turned back is because it helps us better understand where we are at and how we can plan and make wise decisions. You can mail it in. You can put it in the offering. You can leave it at the Information Center or the Stewardship Booth. Basically, when you turn in a card, the only person that sees it is the Finance Office. I don't see it; nobody else sees it. We never track your giving. The only thing we do is accumulate the totals to get a better picture of where we're at. So that is the purpose of the card, and we would ask you to consider that.

Thirdly, there is a brochure describing a number of stewardship classes that are coming up, which flow out of our January series. If you're struggling with debt or are in a bit of crisis, we can help with that. If you would like to know how to better budget your money, we can help with that. There are a number of options there.

I want to bring to your attention two specific training sessions under the leadership training. One is we do have a ministry where we provide a budget counselor or a budget coach. If you are in some level of crisis and need some help to get back on your feet, we can offer you someone who will walk through this with you one-on-one and, over a period of time, help you get straightened out financially.

But of course to do that, we always need more budget counselors. To serve as a budget counselor, you don't have to be an accountant. As a matter of fact, you don't have to have an expertise in finances. If you have a basic understanding of budgeting, we can train the rest. What you do need to have is the heart of a shepherd. The point is not to go in and try to fix people's money and exit. It is to care for them and to walk with them and shepherd them through a very difficult time in their lives. We need people with a basic understanding of finances and the heart of a shepherd. If you would be interested in that kind of a ministry, there is a training opportunity coming up.

The second is for LifeGroup leaders. We've asked all the LifeGroups to go through Crown at some point. If you're a LifeGroup leader, we're asking you to take your group through the Crown study. All it takes is about two hours of training and you will be equipped to lead your group. There is a LifeGroup leader training coming up Saturday, January 28, for two hours, which would be an opportunity for you to get trained in that.

One of the courses we offer is brand new for us and we're very excited about it. We think it has the potential to dramatically affect a lot of people, and that is a ministry we call Joyful Employment. At this time, I'm going to ask Doug Walker to come and tell us a little bit more about this ministry.

Doug Walker:

Good morning. Are you retired and would now like to offer your skills and knowledge through a volunteering effort or perhaps even through another work environment? Are you stuck in your present job and feel like you're not getting anywhere or going anywhere? Or are you blessed with the energy of youth and are ready to charge off within the workforce, but you need somebody to help you find out how you're wired so you can find a job that fits you?

As Bryan said, we are very excited to offer the Joyful Employment Ministry. JEM, as it is called, is a ten-week program that introduces you to the concept that your work *does* matter to God. It helps you discover your strengths and abilities and will help you with career planning. There will be classroom presentations and individualized practical help sessions. As mentioned, these are ten-week classes that start on Thursday night, February 9, and continue through April 13. We would invite you to come to the Stewardship Booth to get more information. Thank you very much.

Video Clip of Jim & Shirley (This video clip will soon be available for viewing online at our website: www.lincolnberean.org under Ministries, Stewardship, Videos.)

Bryan Clark:

I've had the privilege of knowing Jim and Shirley for most of my life, and without hesitation I can say that they have been a model of faithfulness to the Lord over these many years.

I'm going to ask you a question this morning. Have you ever given a gift more out of a sense of obligation than your real heart's desire? And in a pinch, have you ever found yourself scrambling around the house trying to find something that was still boxed up that would work as a gift—that you didn't really want or didn't really like, but it would work?

Now I'm sure that's never happened to any of us. But imagine that somebody gave you a gift like that, and you knew that they just gave it out of a sense of obligation. You knew they looked around for something they didn't want, they didn't like, and that was your gift. How would you feel about that? How valued would you feel?

Do we ever do that with God? Do we ever give God the leftovers, what we really don't want or need more out of a feeling of obligation than a real desire to give? And if so, how do you suppose God feels about that? Do you suppose that makes Him feel valued? Do you suppose He likes that?

Well, we don't have to guess at that. It is pretty clear. Turn with me to Malachi chapter 1. Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi was written about 250 years after the prophet Amos, which we looked at last week. Amos wrote during a time of great prosperity, but after that, the nation of Israel was taken into captivity for about 70 years. A small remnant of that group came back to the land, repopulated the land, and that generation was actually very excited about God and really was rejuvenated in their love and worship to Him.

But now several generations have come and gone. The people have lost their heart for God. They've drifted away from God. They are still going through the religious motions out of a sense of obligation, but they really have no heart for God, and that becomes quite evident.

Basically the way this book is written is God makes a charge against His people. The people get defensive and say, "We don't know what You're talking about." And so then God responds by getting very specific about the issues that the people have. We pick it up in chapter 1, verse 6:

“ ‘A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?’ says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, ‘How have we despised Your name?’ You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, ‘How have we defiled You?’ In that you say, ‘The table of the LORD is to be despised.’ But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?’ ” (Malachi 1:6-8, *NASB)

The accusation is that if God is God, He deserves to be treated as such. But the people are despising Him. The people are devaluing Him. That is the charge. The people come back and say, "Wait a minute! How have we done that? How have we despised You?" In their mind they're thinking, *We're going through the religious rituals. We're fulfilling the letter of the law. What's the problem here?* So God gets very specific and says, "I'll tell you what the problem is. The problem is when you bring your offerings to Me, you bring Me the lame and the sick and the blind."

In other words, you can imagine when it's time to bring a gift, it's really not what they want to do. That's not what's in their heart, but they feel this religious obligation. So they're looking around the flock and figuring out how they can do this with the least amount of effect. *So, let's see... here's one that's almost dead, so let's take him. Here's one that's blind; he'll be dead soon, let's take him. Here's one that's lame; he'll never survive, let's take him.* They're figuring out these are the ones that are going to die anyway. *These are the ones that are really no good to us. Let's take those and we'll give those to God.* And the challenge to them is, "Why don't you do that to your governor?"—because He knew immediately the governor would not receive such a sickly gift. So why would they think God would receive the gift?

Do you suppose sometimes we're guilty of giving God the leftovers of our time, of our talents, of our treasure? We try to figure out ways that we can fulfill our obligation with a minimal amount of interruption to our lifestyle, but somehow it satisfies this obligation. So we give God a little leftover time, we give God a little leftover treasure, and we think that should be adequate.

But God responds as to how He feels about that. Verse 9 is very important:

“But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?” says the LORD of hosts.

Verse 9 is saying, "You treat God this way. You give God what you don't want. You give God what is of no value to Him. You don't really give out of your heart. You give out of an obligation, and by doing that you devalue Him, you despise Him. But you turn right around and you expect God's favor. You expect God's blessing." And the challenge is that God is saying, "Why do you think you would get My favor if you treat Me that way? If you're going to give Me that kind of a gift, what right do you have to expect that I would pour out My favor on you?"

It always interests me, the Christians that live their lives their own way. They really just kind of let God in on the fringes and give these leftover gifts to God. But then they're amazed when God doesn't bless everything in their lives, and somehow they think it's unfair if God isn't making everything work out. It's like this disconnect between the way they are living and the favor of God.

I think sometimes when we talk about giving, whether it is of our time or of our treasures, we have it in our mind that there has got to be some way to do this where it doesn't really cost us much and it doesn't really interrupt our lifestyles much. But you have to understand that the cost of the gift is the point. That is what makes worship *worship*. It costs us something. It's supposed to cost us something. It is supposed to affect my lifestyle—that is the point of the gift. It is in the cost that is actually worship. When I give God what I don't need and what I have left over, there's no worship in that. The gift is in the cost. The worship is in the cost. It is supposed to cost us something.

In 1 Chronicles 21, King David is wanting to offer a sacrifice to God but he needs a piece of ground to do that. He finds a piece of ground and offers to buy it, and the owner of the ground says, "You know, you don't have to buy it; I'll just give it to you." David refuses to take it and insists on paying for it, and he follows that with this line: "I will not give to God that which costs me nothing."

You see, the reality is it is supposed to cost us something. That's the sacrifice. That's the worship. That's the substance of the gift. In processing this passage in thinking about this weekend, I processed it in my own life and thought, *Well, what does it cost me?* Typically I don't think that way all year long. So I actually walked down the hall to the Finance Office and asked for a copy of my giving record for 2005. I got the record and I just thought about it awhile.

There's always this balance of what's appropriate disclosure for a preacher when it comes to this area of giving. But I do think it's important for you to know this isn't just talk. I want to practice what I preach. For years, Patti and I have given well beyond ten percent, and I looked at the total of what we had given in 2005, and one of the ways to process it is I could have gone to any car lot in Lincoln and I could have bought a brand new car, could have paid for it with cash and had money left over with what we gave. So I concluded that it absolutely affected our lifestyle. It affected where we went on vacation. It affected the vehicles we drive. It affected things we purchase. It alters our lifestyle, without question. But that is the point! It is supposed to cost us something. I have a whole list of things I'd really like to buy, but I can't afford to buy them if I'm going to choose to give. I'm not complaining about that by any means. God has been extremely faithful to us. I love to give. It's my joy to give; that's what I want to do. That's my expression of worship and trust. But I do have to say it costs us something. It does dramatically alter our lifestyle, and that is the point.

Verse 10:

"Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you. For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations," says the LORD of hosts. "But you are profaning it, in that you say, 'The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.' You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the LORD of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the LORD.

“But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King,” says the LORD of hosts, “and My name is feared among the nations.” (vs. 10-14)

What God is saying is, “I wish there was one who had the courage to just shut the gate and keep people out if that’s the way they are going to give. I don’t want the lame. I don’t want the sick. I don’t want the leftovers. Let’s just close the gate and end it here.”

But God is not having a pity party. God is not having a self-esteem problem. He goes on to say, “I am the God of gods. I am the King of kings, and every nation will revere me as God.” In essence what He is saying is, “Even though you, My people, don’t treat me that way, I *am* God. And one day everyone will know that I am God, whether you treat Me that way or not.” It’s a great statement of God’s declaration that whether His people treat Him that way or not, He is God and He is the King, and He expects to be treated that way.

Flip over to Malachi 3. Starting in verse 7, it’s the same basic format. God makes the charge, the people get defensive, and God defines His charge.

“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?’ ”

The charge is that the people have drifted far from God. God calls them to repent and God will meet them there. But their defensive response is, “How can we return? What do we have to repent from?” It’s just like before: “We haven’t done anything wrong.” In their mind they are fulfilling these religious obligations, so they think, *What’s the problem?* Well, okay; they asked, so God answers (verse 8):

“Will a man rob God? Yet you are robbing Me! But you say, ‘How have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you!” (vs. 8-9)

It’s a pretty strong answer. God says, “Okay, for starters, you’re stealing from Me.” The people say, “How are we stealing from You?” And God says, “Because you are not giving back that which I rightfully deserve.”

We have this tendency to think, *What’s mine is mine*, and we kind of portion out a little bit to God if we feel like it. But the Bible has a very different message: Everything you have is not yours; it’s God’s. God expects a portion of that to be given back to Him, and when we don’t give back to God, we’re stealing it. We’re taking something that rightfully doesn’t belong to us and we’re using it for our own personal being. The reality is, when we choose not to give to God, we’re misappropriating funds, and that’s a form of stealing. So God calls them on it. He says, “You people are stealing from Me.”

This is followed by one of the most remarkable verses in all of the Bible as it has to do with giving. Verse 10:

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,” says the LORD of hosts, “if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.”

That is a remarkable verse. If you were to go through the Bible cover to cover and find the number of times that God says, “Test Me,” you would find it is extremely rare. As a matter of fact, most of

the time what you find is: “Don’t test God”...“Don’t test God”...“Don’t test God.” It is a very rare occasion when God says, “Test Me.” It’s a challenge. It helps us understand how serious of an issue this is to the heart of God. This is one of those issues where God says, “I’m putting down a challenge. Test Me. Try Me. Give to Me.”

It says God longs to open up the windows of heaven and to pour out blessings upon us like we have never known, blessings that may come in any number of ways. God doesn’t have a cash flow problem. God isn’t lacking anything. That’s why some leftover gift does nothing for God. He is not thinking something is better than nothing. If it doesn’t represent your heart, if it doesn’t represent your worship, then it misses the point. What good is that to God?

What God wants from you is your heart. The reality is God longs for you to know the riches of heaven. He wants to open up the windows of heaven and pour out His blessings upon you, if you are willing to take that challenge, that step of faith, and to release your treasures into His hands—to test Him and see if He will be faithful to what He has promised. God longs for you to trust Him and to give to Him and believe that He will be your provider, that He will take care of you in ways you cannot even begin to imagine.

You know, the reality is when we choose to rob God, in the end all we’re doing is robbing ourselves. We’re the ones who come up short. We’re the ones who lose out. We’re the ones who miss it. Oftentimes we fail to give because we want to keep that. We want to buy this, we want to buy that, we want to do this, we want to do that. We don’t want our lifestyle cramped. But sometimes we just need to open our eyes and realize, “But wait a minute, that’s not what’s happening. We’re not getting ahead; things aren’t all working out.”

There’s an interesting verse in Haggai 1, where God says when I choose not to give to God, what I am doing is taking my money and putting it in a purse that has holes in it. No matter how much I put in there, it seems like it never amounts to anything; it just keeps going right through. And at some point there’s a realization that God needs to be my provider, because this isn’t working.

Most of you are aware of the fact that several years ago, for reasons unknown, I got it in my head that I needed to learn to train a horse. So I bought a yearling, and for the most part, it’s been a good process. There have been a few bumps and bruises along the way, but it’s been a good thing. But I do remember back to that first year. I went to the seminars, read the books, talked to people, did all the groundwork and did all the prep work. But there comes this moment when you put your foot in the stirrup, and either you’re going to get in the saddle...or you’re not. The heart is racing. There’s a degree of fear. You’re not sure what’s going to happen. But at that moment you realize, *Either I conquer this fear and I climb in the saddle or I might as well sell the horse and move on*—because at that point you’re just stuck if you’re not willing to take that next step.

That’s exactly where some of you are today. It’s easy to come and to listen and think, *Oh, Bryan’s talking about money again; this is the last week*” and you kind of squirm. You go out the door and you feel a little bit guilty, and then you have a big sigh of relief that finally it’s over and next week we can move on.

Do you understand you’re the one that’s missing out? Do you understand that God is in His heaven longing to open up the windows of heaven and pour out His blessing if you’ll just take up His challenge? You’re the one that’s losing there.

I realize it's very hard. You look at your budget, you look at your finances, and there's an element of fear. I understand that. But at some point in your Christian walk you have to put your foot in the stirrup, conquer those fears and say, "Okay, I'm gonna' get in the saddle and I'm gonna' ride."

Jim and Shirley said it well in the video: "Forty-six years and God has always been faithful." Test Him. Try Him and see if God will be faithful. It's not a case where we work out our budget and we give God the leftovers. I don't have a magical bag of money that floats on a cloud at home that just goes to God. It costs us something. It does change our lifestyle. It does affect what we can buy. It's supposed to cost us something—that's the worship in it. It *is* a step of faith...but a magnificent step of faith.

If you have a million dollars in the bank and you give a thousand dollars, let's be honest, you're not exactly living on the edge. You know who's living on the edge? That single parent sitting right next to you, week after week, who barely survives financially but has the courageous faith to give ten percent of her paycheck to God week in and week out, because she knows God will be her provider. Those are the types of gifts that God is thrilled with because those are steps of courageous faith. That costs that person a great deal. That is the substance; that is the worship of the gift. It is supposed to cost something.

What difference would it make? I mentioned two years ago that if everybody at Lincoln Berean gave just a tithe, ten percent, it would result in 13.5 million dollars a year. Now I'm telling you this, we could turn Lincoln upside down for the cause of Christ with those resources.

Let's take it to a global scale. It's estimated today it would take 80 billion dollars a year to address the issue of world hunger, and included in that is the issue of literacy and the issue of basic health needs. Eighty billion dollars a year. If all of the historically Christian churches just in America gave a tithe, it would result in an additional—not a total of, but an *additional* 156 billion dollars per year.

Think of it this way: If the church kept half of that for its own needs and gave half away, you could solve the problem of world hunger, including literacy and health needs. And can you imagine the response world-wide to such an outpouring? It would probably be the greatest evangelistic outreach the world has ever known. How could you not sit up and say, "This God is God!?" The potential of what could be, if God's people trusted Him, is staggering.

God this very day sits in the heavens longing for you to know the riches that He wants to pour out upon you. He has blessings He wants to pour out in ways you can't even begin to imagine today, if you're just willing to take up His challenge.

It starts with each one of us being willing to put our foot in the stirrup, conquer our fears, and climb on that saddle and take this remarkable ride of faith. We need to take God at His challenge, that God might pour out the blessings of heaven upon our lives in ways we have never known, that we would say to God, "Yes, God, You get my best. And God, it is for this purpose I live."

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Study Questions
Test Me Now in This
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Opening Discussion

1. What makes a gift meaningful to you?
2. How do you feel when you know someone is giving to you out of obligation rather than from the heart? In that case, is something better than nothing?
3. What does it mean to give God your best? What does that cost you? Should God be satisfied with something rather than nothing?

Bible Study

1. Read Malachi 1:6-14. What is the problem God identifies?
2. What is God's point in 1:8?
3. According to 1:9, do we really have a right to expect God's favor if we dishonor God with our giving?
4. Compare David's attitude in 1 Chronicles 21:24. What is the point of our giving? Does God have cash flow problems?

What actually makes our giving an act of worship?

4. Read Malachi 3:7-10. What is the problem God identifies?
5. What is God's challenge to the people?

Compare that with 2 Corinthians 9:6-12 and Haggai 1:3-6.

When we fail to give our best to God (when we rob God) who ultimately suffers? When we give to God are we gaining or losing?

What is the principle of sowing and reaping?

Application

1. God challenged His people to test Him in this area of giving. What does that mean to you?
2. Is God getting the best of your time, talent and treasure? Is there an area where you could do better?

What would be the practical steps toward improvement in that area?

3. If everyone at LBC gave ten percent to God, we would have an annual budget of \$13.5 million. This means we could easily have the new auditorium paid off the day we move in.

Would you commit to praying that God would move His people to give generously, with a goal of being debt free by Easter of 2007 as a testimony of God's faithfulness?