

Special Focus

July 15, 2018

TITHING: AN OBEDIENT RESPONSE TO A GRACIOUS GOD

Malachi 3:7-12

By the time Malachi was penned, Israel had been cured of her persistent sin of idolatry. But a new sin had taken its place: the sin of apathy. The central theme of this prophetic book is the peoples' half-hearted commitment to their God. Malachi's method of dealing with their sin is to pose a series of rhetorical questions highlighting their sins, exposing their lame attempts to justify them, and demanding a re-commitment to obeying the requirements God had set.

One such area of apathy was in their half-hearted giving. While the tithe mentioned was required of the people of Israel—and is not technically required of New Testament Christians—the principle of giving God His due is just as important to us today as it was to the Jews of Malachi's day.

The problem of half-hearted giving (v. 8). It's interesting that so many of today's church people complain when asked to give a mere ten percent of their income to the work of God. According to Numbers 18, a tithe (or "tenth") of Israel's income—and especially the "first-fruits" of their crops—was required to support the tribe of Levi from which the priests came. Another tenth was given to support the duties of the tabernacle (Deut. 12) and yet another was required every third year for helping the poor and needy (Deut. 14). Hence the Jews were not only encouraged, but *required* to donate 23% of their income to God each year! Their failure to do so prompted Malachi's rhetorical question, "Will a man rob God?" Failure to bring God His due (in both their required tithes and their freely given offerings) was paramount to robbing God of what was rightfully His. Every indication pointed to their unwillingness, rather than their inability, to bring the required amount to God's storehouse. Was this intentional rebellion against God? Probably not. Rather it was the result of neglect...just another product of their half-hearted commitment.

The penalty for half-hearted giving (v. 9). The original construction—to be *cursed with the curse*—indicates the nation was already suffering under the penalty of their apathy (see v. 11), and yet had not caught on to the cause of their suffering. The phrase "the whole nation" indicates the extent of their neglect. The people who were charged with bringing their tithes to the Lord, the Levites who received it, and the priests who were responsible for dispersing it were all equally guilty! As a result, God's anger burned against them all.

The promise for whole-hearted giving (vv. 10-12). Rather than pronounce an even harsher penalty against them, God enticed His people to obedience with a proposition and a promise. First, He invited them to "test" Him. This is the only place in Scripture (that I am aware of!) where God actually invites His people to "put Him to the test." Normally, the word test is the word for "tempt." God's people are warned in Deuteronomy 6:16 specifically not to try God's patience by testing Him. But here the invitation is wide open; not to try God's patience but rather to prove His faithfulness. Next, God makes a three-fold promise. If they will bring Him their full tithe, He will (1) pour out His blessings upon them so abundantly that they won't be able to absorb them all; (2) remove the curse they were under by putting a halt to the pestilence and

famine that was causing their crops to fail; and (3) make them an example to neighboring nations of what a blessed nation looks like.

The lesson for us? While we are not technically *required* to tithe, we are certainly taught to give back to God from that which He has given to us; and to do so with joy. The apostle Paul put it this way: “Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver” (2 Cor. 9:7).