

ARE YOU IN POSSESSION OF STOLEN GOODS?

Malachi: Learning God's View on Money, Tithing, and Serving

PRIMARY SCRIPTURE

Malachi 3:6-18

SECONDARY SCRIPTURE

1 Timothy 6:8-10, Proverbs 3:7-10, Colossians 3:23-24

OBJECTIVES

1. THINK: Recognize that God calls us to tithe and serve Him.
2. TODAY: Be aware of the ways in which we live in a culture that worships money and serves itself.
3. APPLY: Understand that when we tithe, we kill the god of money and serve the God of all Creation.

OVERVIEW

This lesson looks at the words the prophet Malachi shares to the Israelites. He challenges them to be faithful to the Lord by giving the first portion of their money to God and by giving their lives to serve him. This lesson examines the stronghold money has on the world and how the discipline of regular giving can free us from that grip.

GETTING THINGS STARTED

Have you ever had something stolen from you? If so, what? When? How did it make you feel? (Share your own list of things you've had stolen from you.)

It has got to be one of the worst feelings in the world to have something stolen from you. You feel violated, insecure, and angry. In addition, if the item has sentimental value and is therefore irreplaceable, you experience a sense of loss. Or, if it's an item that contained valuable information such as a credit card or computer or cell phone, you have to go through the hassle of making sure the person who stole your property doesn't also steal your identity. What a drag!

When you think about how this makes you feel, it brings a whole new meaning to the text we're going to read today which says that sometimes we steal from God. That is a bold statement and one we should not take lightly. Since the last thing we want to do is play games with God, let's see what the Bible says about how to avoid this.

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TEACHING GUIDE

We don't always intentionally find ourselves rebelling against God. Sometimes, it creeps up on us when we least expect it. Maybe we start out intending to go to church every weekend, and then one thing after the next happens and we eventually find ourselves not going at all. Or in school, maybe you don't intend to stop doing your homework, but you get behind on one assignment and then before you know it, you give up.

This is what has happened in this Bible text as God confronts the Israelites through the prophet Malachi. This claim surprises them and they ask, "How have we done this?" Malachi reveals they have stolen from God in two areas: their tithes and offerings and their attitude towards serving.

As a group, read Malachi 3:6-18 and then make the following teaching points:

LESSONS FROM THE BOOK OF MALACHI

- **If God feels distant, stop walking away.**

Malachi reminds his audience that God has not changed. It's not as if His commands or His character are a moving target. Slowly, over time however, the Israelites have wandered off until God finally says enough is enough! God desires that they stop wandering and start returning. This may appear to be simple but in fact it is usually the opposite of what we do. When we don't feel close to God, we often stop reading our Bible, or stop praying, or stop going to church, or stop worshipping. It's no wonder He feels so distant! Returning to God may not feel natural, but it's certainly necessary.

- **Be a giver and money won't be your God.**

Money easily distracts us from God. Because we all need some money to live, it's easy for us to live for money. Our jobs, the money we make, and how we spend it becomes the focus of our lives and before we know it, money has become our God. When we develop the regular discipline of giving, not only do we stop "robbing God", but we also give away the hold it has on us, too. Plus it's a constant reminder that God is the One who provides both the job and the ability we have to perform the job!

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- **Serve God, not people.**

If we want to serve God, we have to silence the voice of the world. We don't have commercials on T.V. that encourage us to live a life devoted to God; instead, we experience the opposite. Malachi cautions Israel that even though some in their community say serving God is a waste of time, God disagrees. (See Malachi 3:15.)

- **Honor God with your life and He will honor you.**

There is a one-to-one relationship between serving God and stay connected with God. The more you serve Him, the more you give your time and money to Him, the more connected you will be with God and the more God will be connected to you. He even says to test Him on this one. Give God your time and money and see if He gives it back to you. So try it. You just might find you'll end up closer to God than you've ever been.

DISCUSSING THE TEXT

- What do you think about the fact that God says His people are robbing Him? Do you feel like you're robbing God when you don't give?
- In this text, God says to test Him in being a faithful giver. Does this mean that God is going to make us rich if we give our money to Him? If not, what does it mean?
- Read Proverbs 3:7-10. How does this verse apply to the subject of giving? How is this similar to what the prophet Malachi is saying?
- Read 1 Timothy 6:6-8. Do you agree with this warning? Have you seen people ruined or ruled by money? If so, what was/is their life like?
- Verse 16 commends those who fear the Lord and honor his name. In your own words, explain what it means to fear the Lord and honor his name. What specifically does that look like?

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- **SERVE GOD vs. SERVE SELF WHITEBOARD EXERCISE:** Verse 18 says there is a difference between those who serve God and those who do not. What would you say that difference is? What character traits or habits do you think are true of those who consistently serve the Lord? How are they different from those who do not? Take a white board or a sheet of paper and compare and contrast the two. One column could be for character traits of those who serve God and the next could be for their self-serving counter parts.

APPLYING THE TEXT

- How do you develop a good giving habit such as a tithe of 10% of your income? Do you think this is easier to do when you're younger and have less money or when you're older and have more money? Why do you think that? [Teachers note: Don't forget to point out that 10% of \$50 means giving \$5 whereas 10% of \$50,000 a year is \$5,000.] Do you need to make changes in your giving pattern? What will you do?
- Can you give specific examples of how you serve God? What are some new or additional ways you can serve God this week?
- Have you experienced the rewards of serving God or giving money to Him? If so, how has God blessed you and others through your obedience? What would you encourage others to do this week?

FOR KEEPS (MEMORY VERSE)

Honor the LORD with your wealth and with the best part of everything your land produces (Proverbs 3:9 NLT).