

A Life of (un)Repentance

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[0 : 0 0] Ebenezer Scrooge. Even if you've not read Charles Dickens' book, Christmas Carol, or seen the movies, whether the kind of new CGI type one or the Muppets old one, most of us will know the name and know what kind of person he was. He was a businessman, wasn't he, who, well, didn't care one jot about his employees, underpaying them, mistreating them, never giving them a day off, selfish and cold-hearted, that there was more chill and coldness in his heart than in the air of a Victorian winter. Dickens writes that Scrooge was a squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner. A sinner who needs to repent, who needs to turn from his squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old ways and set off in a new direction.

And the story or the film goes from there, doesn't it? Over these weeks in Malachi, in God's final word here to the people in the Old Testament, we've seen, haven't we, that God's people are cold-hearted old sinners who probably, we might say, find Dickens' description of Scrooge kind of a kindness to them. But there's much more chill in their hearts towards God than in a Victorian winter.

In a word, time and time again over these weeks, or if you were to read back through Malachi, we've found a people who are faithless, faithless, faithless in their love for God, in their worship of God, faithless in marriage. They're faithless in honoring God's name, they're dishonoring his name. It's the day of lip service religion and lip service living.

But this evening, and in this fifth and second last conversation, back and forth between the prophet and God's people, God comes to call his faithless, sinful people back to himself.

He comes to call them to return, to turn again to him and to set off in a new direction. But the call to repentance and to live a life of repentance doesn't just go out to these people, does it? In Mark's gospel, the very first sentence that Mark puts on the lips of the Lord Jesus is this, that the time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is at hand. Repent and believe in the gospel.

[3 : 0 1] The one who was promised in our passage last week, who was coming to bring justice, to put everything right, came and called for repentance. And that cry, that call echoes down to us here in this very room this evening. And so what does repentance mean? What does it mean for Malachi to call God's people to return, to turn to turn to him or to repent? What does it mean to live a life of repentance or a life of turning towards God? Well, it can be summed up in kind of two parts or two words that we're going to see in this passage. It is a life of turning to him, turning to God. It is literally a 180 degree from facing this way to facing God over this way. It is to turn and it is to obey, to trust and obey.

And that's what we have then in these few verses before us, a description of what it looks like for these people to return to God, to repent, to change their ways. And that's the life that God calls us all to, a life of repentance. So what does a life of repentance look like then? Let's come to our first point. Firstly, it is one that turns to God for he is faithful to forgive. One that turns to God for he is faithful to forgive. God's people have turned from him in lots of ways and we've mentioned some of them already. But there's another reason added here. There's another reason given that God calls them to repent or to turn away from. And it's that God's people aren't bringing tithes and offerings.

God says, you're robbing me. Verse 8, will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, how have we robbed you? In your tithes and contributions, you are cursed with a curse for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. So why is God calling them to turn? Why is he calling them to repent, to change direction? They're being faithless with their offerings. God's people were commanded to bring tithes, to bring a tenth or ten percent of their crop or whatever it was that they had for income, to bring ten percent of it and give it back to God in worship. That's the first offering mentioned here. But do you see there's also a second one? It is tithes and contributions.

Contributions. Contributions was kind of a free will offering, something they could give on top of that in response to God's goodness. And that's the second one. All God's people had was from God.

And God said, give a portion back to me in worship. Not to earn God's favor. No, not at all. These are God's people, but in joyful recognition of who God is and all he's done for them. But very briefly, just before we go on, what was the tithe for? Well, largely for three things. First of all, a living for the priests who had no land given to them as an inheritance when they were brought out of Egypt and given the land. So it was for the priests. It was also to aid the poor.

[6 : 28] And it also went towards festivals and feastings when the people gathered together. So that is why God called them to give it. And they weren't bringing it. The people were a bit like Ebenezer Scrooge. They'd forgotten the blessings God had given them and all that God had done for them.

I wonder if any of us know, some of us might know what the name Ebenezer means. Ebenezer Scrooge had what he should have been doing right there in his name. Ebenezer is kind of a stone of help, literally. His very name should have reminded him of all the blessings of everything that he'd been given up to this point in his life. But Ebenezer Scrooge had forgotten all that and his heart had grown very cold. And God's people, whose very ancestors had set up a literal Ebenezer, a stone of help back in 1 Samuel chapter 7, to remind them of God's blessing and goodness that this far, and that he would continue to go with them. They had forgotten that and had grown cold towards God. Now we might say as we're sitting here tonight, and I was reading this passage through this week and asking, is it really that bad? Is this really that serious? Because the language is strong. What does it say? It says they're cursed with a curse. That's our way of putting kind of in bold, double underlined, highlighted pen right over it. This is meant to stand out and jump off the page to us. It's very serious. So why is that? Because it's an issue of unbelief.

They're disobeying God because they don't trust God, because they don't think God is trustworthy and good, and that is obeying and trusting and leaning into what his word says is a good thing. It's an issue of their heart, of unbelief. But God actually takes the stakes even further. We might say, well, that's pretty serious, but he takes it even further, doesn't he? Because what does he say in verse 7?

Not that it's just the whole nation not doing this. He actually says in verse 7, this has been the case since the days of your fathers. Since the days of your fathers you have turned aside for my statutes, commands, and laws, and not kept them. And in the book of Malachi, in the context of this book, who is their father? It's Jacob. It's Jacob. And dear friends, as we lean into this, we're going to see the beauty and the wonder of what's going on here. So look again at verse 6 and 7. Verse 6, For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside for my statutes and not kept them. So dear friends, let's lay these two things aside, who they are, who Jacob is, and who God is, and see the wonder of this open up. So who was Jacob? Well, Jacob was Isaac's son, Abraham's grandson. And what was he like?

Well, we've been helped. We've been in Genesis recently in the mornings, haven't we? What was he like? What did he do? He took something which didn't belong to him. He took something which didn't belong to him. And how does God describe God's people right here? Children of Jacob. And what are they doing? They're keeping something that isn't rightfully theirs. They're taking something that isn't rightfully theirs. Just as Jacob took the blessing which wasn't his and so robbed Esau.

[10 : 13] So God is saying, you are robbing from me and stealing what is mine. God is saying to them, like father, like son. Or here, like great, great, great, great, great, great, great, great grandson.

Over a thousand years has passed. And he's saying, oh, children of Jacob, you're just the same. That's the point. How did Dickens describe Scrooge? A covetous old sinner.

This is a nation of covetous old sinners. Some of us might have family heirlooms that are passed down from generation to generation. Grandfather clocks, books, maybe paintings, things like that.

But God is saying, look what's been passed on to you. Look at the family heirloom, if you like. Look at the family likeness. It is your sin. And so do you feel the weight of this from Jacob to now to the whole nation? What hope is there for us? What hope is there for us?

Verse 6, there is our hope. For I, the Lord, do not change. Therefore, you are not consumed. And then into verse 7, return to me and I will return to you. That is their hope.

[11 : 42] Israel, Jacob's children, they are what? They are unchanged and faithless. But God, their father, their true father, is what? He's unchanging and faithful. Faithful. That's the hope, the unchanging, unyielding faithfulness of God who loves them and is patient to them from generation to generation and who once again says, return, come back, repent and come to me. You see, if I can put it this way, although their condemnation is that they are children of Jacob and bear the family likeness, that is exactly where their hope lies. That they are children of Jacob. Why? Chapter 1, verse 1 and 2.

Jacob, I have loved. Jacob, I have loved. Therefore, I love you and call you back to me. Jacob was a thief and a scoundrel and a cheat, but I was faithful to my covenant promises to forgive him and bless him. You are thieves and a scoundrel and robbing me, but I will be faithful to my promises to forgive and bless you. Return to me and I will return to you. It is glorious, friends. It is glorious.

Can you hear the gracious invitation of God? The patience of God? The long-suffering of God? Come back to me. So two applications. How does this help us? Two applications, two group of us. Well, for those of us who know and love the Lord, we too are called to live a life of repentance, of turning from sin to God. Lives lived with our faces turned before God. But if you're here this evening and you have turned away from facing God or for a time turned away from facing God, you've torn up God's law, you've thrown it in the bin, you've ignored everything God has said, well, hear the gracious invitation of your heavenly Father this evening through the Lord Jesus who says, return. Who says, come back, return. Now, no, not just regret, not just I'm sorry I kind of got caught about that. Oh, that wasn't so great. No, repent. It is a 180 degree turn. Turn away from your sin and turn back to God.

But perhaps some of us think, will God really take me back? This has been a habitual sin. It's gone on maybe for two years, five years, 10, 20, 30 years. I have lived contrary to what God has said here.

Can he really be patient with me and call me back? Yes. Yes. What have we just read? Have confidence in the enduring faithfulness and forgiveness of God. Dear friends, don't run or hide. Don't hide.

[14 : 34] Turn, turn, return. Come to God afresh and know the cleansing forgiveness of the Lord Jesus. What amazing grace. God is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. So dear friends, if you know that you have ignored from God and turned from him, come back to him again. But perhaps you've never come to the Lord Jesus. Perhaps you don't know who God is and you've never trusted him before. The same call from this passage goes to any of us. Come to God. Repent. Turn around and face God and walk over in his direction. Turn from your sin. Trust the Lord Jesus. Follow him. Don't wait. Come today. These words follow hot on the heels of what we had last week that a day of judgment for sin is coming. So dear friends, tonight is the night. This is the hour. Come to the Lord Jesus and know his great grace and forgiveness that he holds out. He holds out to all, to all of us. So a life of repentance is one that turns to God, turns away from sin and turns to God. But tragically, they don't. They don't, or not all of them do.

God says return, but they answer him, how shall we return? And it's not that they don't know. They, they, this is the end of the Old Testament. They have got over a thousand years behind them of history. It's that they're dragging their heels. That this is the child who's asked to put on their pajamas and they say to their parents, well, what are pajamas? They've worn them every day for the last seven or eight years, right? It's not a genuine question. It's a delaying strategy. Not that we ever have that in our household, okay? But it comes from a stubborn place, a hard-heartedness, right? It's, it's what can I do to put this off? It shows that I'm not really listening. I don't really see the grace and goodness that's been held out to me. But God still issues the call and having turned or longing for them to turn, he says, come and trust me, trust me and obey me. And that's the second thing, a life of repentance, trust and obeys God for he loves to bless. Verse 10, God says to them, bring the full tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my, there may be foods.

Let me read it from here, sorry. Verse 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.

So here God tells his people to, to obey him and, and to bring the tithe, obey my word and watch me bless you. He says, trust me, obey me and watch me come through. Verse 11 hints that there's, there's a famine, there's a destroyer, their crop is not yielding what it should. And he says, no, come and trust me and see the blessing that will come. Now this is a really interesting verse because putting God to the test is usually a bad thing more often than not. And actually most of the time in the Bible, we are told not to put God to the test. Why? Because usually it comes from a place of saying God should be subjected to my rules and subjected to my expectations. It's the kind of test that makes God out to be like a kind of performing circus act where I'm the ringmaster and God's got to do what I say. It is the testing of unbelief. But the difference here is that God has kind of set the, the terms and instructions that they haven't. So actually what we have here is more like an invitation to, to take the plunge into the pool as it were and see how warm and good the water is, to see how good God is. It's an invitation to be, be amazed by God and the trustworthiness of his word.

It's the parent holding out their hand to the unsure child who isn't sure about going into school or nursery or whatever it is and says, take my hand. Let's go in and see how good it is.

[19 : 00] And God is saying that, take my hand, trust me and watch me bless you. Now, bringing tithes for these, for these believers, for God's people here, it wouldn't have been money.

It would have been bringing something, physically bringing something, bringing some produce, whatever they had to the temple. But it is bringing 10% of it to the priests. And the point is this, it's about their wallets. It's about their current accounts. It's about giving what God has given them as an income back to him. And so of course the question then comes to us, feels like the question we've all been waiting for perhaps, do we still need to tithe? Does the 10% as God has given here in the Old Testament, does it carry over? Well, let's hold the suspense just a little bit longer. We will answer that in a minute. But before we get there, I want to answer the why question. The why question.

Why should we give our money? Because that is the issue in front of us here, right? God has, this is his people. He's saved them. He's loved them. He's called them to themselves. And they are to offer back what? Well, it is their finance. It is their money. So why should we give our money? Well, before I start, let me just say this, a little bit like when we talked about marriage a few weeks ago, we can't talk about everything here that the Bible says about giving or about offerings or about money.

But hopefully we get some helpful things about what Malachi helps us see about giving our money. So why should I give our money? Why should you, why should me give our money back to God as an offering?

Well, I want to give you really one reason here, one prime reason from the book. It is for our hearts. It is for our hearts. You see, the sense of this whole book, I think, of Malachi is that God doesn't just want their external religion. Remember back to chapter one, he said, actually, I want you just to close the doors of your church because the worship is so bad, right? God isn't just about upping the external religion here. What he's inviting them to here isn't just to get the kind of standing order set up with the treasurer or with the deacons or to take a little bit more cash out on a Sunday morning and then I'll be happy. No. The reason he wants them to give, the reason he wants them to test him is for their hearts, that they would come to grow in their love and joy and delight of God and to see how good he really is. Because money does at least two things, maybe does more than that, but at least two things with our hearts. First, our hearts follow our money. Just before the passage that was read for us earlier, the Lord Jesus says this, he says, where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.

[22 : 02] So our hearts follow our money. Where our treasure is, our hearts will follow. If you have stocks or shares in Amazon or Pret a Manger or something like that, maybe you'll come and tell me afterwards that those are private companies and you can't have stocks in them anyway. Okay, but you know what I mean? If you put money into a publicly owned company that you can buy stocks and shares in, you want to know how that company is doing. You have a sudden interest to it and you tell everyone to go to prep for their coffee or buy their Christmas presents on Amazon or whatever because you want it to go well and have a strong share price, don't you? You have an interest in how it's doing.

And if we live and give like most of our treasure is waiting for us in heaven, that is where our hearts will be as well. We give here to grow our faith, to be wowed by God as we give money away and offer it back and give it to the church and give it to other works that the Lord is doing. He's saying, come and have an adventure with me. Come and see how good I am and let your faith grow.

And that's how verse 10 comes to us. It does not come to us in the same way as it did them. God said he's going to open out the storehouses of heaven and send all these material blessings to them. That the blessings for us in New Testament days of giving are spiritual ones, spiritual ones.

That there is, people talk about the so-called prosperity gospel that really is no gospel at all, right? Give your money and you'll get health and wealth and a perfect marriage, right? No, the Bible nowhere ever teaches that. Never believe it. But there are spiritual blessings that come to us.

God wants our faith to grow in our hearts, to follow him, to know more of him. So as we give, as we give, we get to see more of what God is like, how faithful he is, how good he is.

[24 : 04] Our hearts follow our treasure, but they also do something else. It also reveals our treasure. They also reveal our treasure. What we're doing with treasure will reveal how our hearts are, that that's what's happened here. The fact that they're not giving shows that they're not trusting God. They're not confident who God is and the promises that he's given to them. So dear friends, God wants us to give because he wants our hearts. God doesn't need our money, right? It's like the donation box thing this morning. God doesn't need our money, but he longs for us to give so that our desires and dreams and affections are built on him and his promises and coming to know him more.

And so our monthly bank statements can also be something of a kind of thermometer of our spiritual life, a thermometer of our hearts. And so it is worth all of us asking, well, what is the temperature of my current account? Or does my current account preach the gospel? Does it show that our treasure is in heaven? Our second question then, how should we give our money? There's a little bit of why for our hearts, but secondly, how should we give? Well, I want to suggest just one word.

There's lots more we could say here, but one word. Generously, generously. The question of tithing is a debated one as we come from the Old Testament to the New Testament. It is a debated one, but I want to suggest this evening that there are really good reasons to see 10% as a great benchmark of giving, as a floor, not a ceiling, even if we still want to debate about whether it's commanded.

Well, why? For one, we are all materially richer than anyone really who lived God's people in the Old Testament times. Even by virtue of the mobile phone that's in your pocket, or the antibiotics you last took the last time you were ill, or the bus or car that you took to get here, right? God's people here in Malachi, they cannot fathom that. We have a lot more than they do.

We are richer, but more than being richer materially, friends. More than that, and much more importantly, we are so much spiritually richer. Spiritually richer. For what did we hear about last week?

[26 : 41] It was the promise of God coming. That they had the promise. But dear friends, we have the reality. What they looked forward to, we look back on. Christ has come, and that should drive us to give generously and abundantly. Oh, look at the generosity of God. He gave what was most precious to us. His only son come to save him. How can we not generously long to give back to him in praise and in worship? Now, of course, some of us have seasons where we're giving 10% back to God, to the church, in worship. We can't give that. And God knows that. He sees that.

But many of us have seasons in life where we can give that, where we can give it and give above it, where we, if you like, can give tithes and contributions, give freewill offerings to the work of the Lord. They gave 10% and often gave other offerings to in response to God's goodness and love.

And so I think the Lord calls all of us to give freely and generously in response to God's generous and lavish love that he has shown us in the Lord Jesus Christ. And dear friends, that's where we're going to finish. Because there is no love like the love of God, who is faithful to the children of Jacob, to his people, to call them back to him, who was faithful to send his one and only son at Christmas time to take on human flesh to come and save his faithless people. That's what we remember at this time of year, isn't it? The eternal son of God who holds up the stars coming to be held by a manger. The one who is utterly self-sufficient in need of nothing coming to be fed by his mother. We remember the one who was rich beyond all splendor became poor that we might become spiritually rich through his poverty.

So friends, as we're about to sing, love so amazing, love so divine, really does demand our soul, our life, our money, our all. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, we thank you so much for the rich, abounding love that you have shown us in and through the Lord Jesus. That he who was rich beyond all splendor became poor so that we could become rich through his poverty. We pray that in all that we would do, we would turn and have live our lives facing you, our heavenly Father. That we would live lives of repentance where we joyfully turn away from sin to you and long to live lives that follow and obey you, knowing it is for our good and our joy and above all, it is for your glory. And we ask and I ask that into the rest of this evening and into this week, that you would help us to use all that you've given us for your glory, whether it be our skills and our gifts, but especially our money. Help us to do, help us to use that in a way, Lord, that is for your glory in this world. And we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen.

[30 : 19] Amen.