

An Appeal to Backsliders
by G. Edward Reid

That's what it is. The entire book of Malachi is an appeal to backsliders! It's only four chapters long. You can read it easily in a single devotional time. This little book closes out the Old Testament portion of the Biblical canon at a time of great moral and religious corruption. The book of Malachi is of particular significance to end-time Christians because it ends with the coming of the Lord and the Elijah message.

The entire book is fascinating and worthy of close study but for this article we will just concentrate on Malachi 3:7-11. In verse 7 God establishes the setting for the counsel to follow:

“From the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them.”

And then follows this awesome encouragement:

“Return to Me, and I will return to you.”

It is easy to see that disobedience brings separation from God!

Then the people ask, “In what way shall we return?” In other words, “How can we get back in harmony and fellowship with you?”

Then God answers in 3:8, “Stop robbing me! You have been robbing me in tithes and offerings.” Then He adds, “You are cursed with a curse, for you have robbed Me.” (Vs. 9) You might never have read an article or heard a sermon on the curses of God but you can read about them in Deuteronomy 28: 15-68. It is not a happy life — living under the curse of God.

Not one to let us wonder what He means, God then gives the solution to the problems of separation and robbery. Not only is the solution given but also incredible blessings are promised to those who obey! Note God's words in vs. 10, 11.

“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in My house, and prove 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 such blessing that there will not be room enough to receive it. And I will rebuke the devourer for your sakes...”

It is easy to miss the awesome promise here when it touches our pocketbooks. But we must remember that God doesn't need the money. He simply wants to bless us and promises to do so if we will only honor His commands.

In this well-known passage, the refusal to tithe is interpreted as misappropriation of God's property — a robbery. Those in Israel who did not tithe or who gave only a

partial tithe instead of the whole tithe deprived God of what was His. This passage establishes beyond any reasonable doubt that the tithe is not part of a person's income. True, it does reach us in the form of income, but it is never ours. To consider it simply as personal income, in order to use it as we wish, is to rob God.

At a deeper level, the problem became even more serious. By not bringing their tithes to the Lord, the people were making an important religious statement. They denied God's providential and loving care for them. They deprived God of the honor and glory He deserves as the One who preserves them. This lack of faith in the Lord is quoted by Malachi:

"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance..?'"(3:14).

For a people not fully committed to the Lord, tithing is indeed a challenge. They trust only in themselves for their own preservation. In this particular situation, the financial condition of the people was precarious and they considered tithing unnecessary. It was to such individuals that the Lord said, "Test me in this" (3:10). This was a call to move forward in faith to do what must be done, believing in God's promised blessings (verses 10-12). As they returned to faithfulness, the Lord expected their faith to grow to the point of trusting Him absolutely, recognizing that their financial security was found only in Him.

To understand even better the spiritual condition of Israel at the time of Malachi, we must understand that just before this exhortation to faithfulness in tithes and offerings God brought two complaints against the priests — the ministers.(See Malachi chapters 1,2). The priests were not following the specific counsel of God in carrying out their work and they were not instructing the people properly. They had only preserved, in a corrupt way, an external form of worship.

Under these circumstances we are tempted to raise the question, "Do such people deserve to receive the tithe?" But that question was not raised by the prophet. God assigned the priests specific responsibilities and they were judged on the basis of those responsibilities and on their proper performance. The people were expected to fulfill whatever the Lord commanded them to do, and He did not excuse a violation of the law of tithe based on a failure of the priesthood. This explains why Malachi was able on the one hand to condemn the sins of the priests, and on the other hand still to require the people to bring their tithes and offerings to the temple.

Malachi reinforces what the rest of the Old Testament teaches about the nature and purpose of tithing. The tithe belongs to the Lord (Lev. 27:30). He used it to provide for the priests and Levites (Num. 18:21), and no one had the right to keep it to himself or herself. Robbing God was a sin committed against the Lord, not against the temple

or the priesthood. Therefore, tithe is required by the Lord in spite of the spiritual condition of those who benefit by it. In His own time He will call them to account.

Not much imagination is needed to make the application to our day. In fact when Ellen White was reviewing the work of the early church she stated:

“As God's work extends, calls for help will come more and more frequently. That these calls may be answered, Christians should heed the command, ‘Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in Mine house.’ Malachi 3:10. If professing Christians would faithfully bring to God their tithes and offerings, His treasury would be full. There would then be no occasion to resort to fairs, lotteries, or parties of pleasure to secure funds for the support of the gospel.” (*Acts of the Apostles*, p. 338).

We can easily conclude that tithing is a witness to the trusting and loving relationship established with our Lord and Savior. That is probably why individuals in the Bible stopped tithing when their relationship with the Lord was broken through apostasy.

Tithing has an additional purpose beyond our relationship to God that He has assigned to it. This was God's idea — not man's. Through the tithe, God made provision for those He called to be His ministers. God is the only one who determines the way tithe is to be used. This has serious implications for those who faithfully return tithes to the Lord. We should never conclude that tithe is a payment made for services received from a minister. That would immediately open the door for its commercialization. Under such circumstances, the individual may feel free to use tithe “to pay” only those whose services were what was wanted or expected. If so, we would be using tithe to control the quality of the product we wanted. But this would contradict the very heart, nature, and purpose of tithing. Tithe always is to be returned to the Lord because it is holy and it is He who invests it or determines how it is to be used— never us.

Therefore, it is never justifiable to stop tithing based on the real or apparent failure of God's ministers. When God's people assumed that attitude, He rebuked them strongly, accusing them of robbing Him. It is not our prerogative to determine by ourselves how or for what purpose the tithe should be used.

Unfortunately, Israel did not heed the appeal for faithfulness that came from God. The time of Malachi was followed closely by almost 400 years of silence on the part of God. But we, today, are spoken to by this important book as well. We see that the prophetic timelines have run their courses. The signs Jesus spoke about that would precede His coming are in abundance around us. Surely it is time for us to take stock of our true relationship with God and heed the counsel of this important book. It's time for all backsliders to return to God.

Malachi, chapter three, concludes on a note of hope for those who are faithful:

“‘They shall be Mine,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘On the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.’ Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.” (Malachi 3:17, 18).