

## Robbers! Robbers of God!

### ~Other Speakers A-F: James Boice:

I was counseling a young man whom I had known for years. Earlier he had made a commitment to Jesus Christ as Lord that had been growing in intensity, but he had also been involved in sexual sin and seemed unable to shake it. I had told him that he needed to be obedient to Christ in this as in other areas, but the struggle went on. In this particular session he told me that several months previously he had decided to stop having sexual relations with his girlfriend to see if that would help get his life straightened out and bring the kind of blessing he expected from Christianity. "But it hasn't worked," he told me. He had done his bit-a great deal in his opinion-but God had not responded as he expected.

This was exactly what was happening with those of Malachi's day. According to the prophet, the people were guilty of many serious sins. The priests were offering blemished animals in a formal but insincere religious ritualism. Many were divorcing their wives to marry unbelieving women. Most had been disobeying God's laws by withholding tithes of their harvest. And they were all accusing God of loving them only halfheartedly and of being unjust in his dealings with them-because he had not prospered them adequately. If they could have put their feelings into words other than those recorded by Malachi, they might have said, "We have been utterly faithful in fulfilling our responsibilities toward God. Never mind the divorces and mixed marriages. Never mind the tithes. We keep our side of the bargain through many things that seem important to us. The problem is that God has not kept his side of the bargain. We have been faithful; he is unfaithful. In short, obedience to God does not work. God has not prospered us as we think he should, and the fault is God's alone."

The answer, of course, is that God had not changed. It is the people who had changed, falling away from a true love for him and from the truly righteous life their forefathers once had (Mal. 3:4). But in another sense, the problem is that the people-we must include ourselves at this point-had changed so little. Though fallen from their original, early devotion to God, they were nevertheless exactly as they had been for much of their history. They were exceedingly sinful and self-righteous, and they needed to repent.

#### God Has Not Changed

Once when I was preaching through the Book of Malachi and dealt at length with God's indictment of divorce and mixed marriages in Malachi 2:10-16, I was approached afterward by a man who identified himself as a Baptist. He said, "I have never heard a sermon on the second chapter of Malachi, but I have heard dozens of sermons on Malachi 3." He was referring to the fact that in Malachi 3:10 God challenges the people to "bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house ... and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it." This is a great text for a sermon on stewardship, which is what this man had so often heard. But it is striking that the context for God's words about tithes is the teaching that God is faithful. The matter of tithes is only an illustration of that teaching.

In theology this doctrine is called immutability. It means that, being perfect, God cannot and does not change. In order to change, a moral being must change in either of two ways. Either he must change for the better or he must change for the worse. God cannot get better, because that would mean that he was less than perfect earlier, in which case he would not have been God. But God cannot get worse either, because in that case he would become imperfect, which he cannot be. God is and must remain perfect in all his attributes.

Malachi 3:6 is a classic statement of immutability: "I the LoRD do not change." But we immediately ask, "What are the specific areas in which God does not change?" And "Why does God mention this particular doctrine here?"

It would be a valid exposition of this text to list every one of God's attributes and show how God does not change in any of them, attributes like sovereignty, wisdom, holiness, self-existence, self-sufficiency, knowledge, and justice. But the relevant attributes here are his love, mercy, grace, and faithfulness. Malachi 3:6 says that it is because of God's immutability in these areas that the people have not been destroyed. At first glance this is surprising, because the theme of the preceding verses has been the people's complaint: "Where is the God of justice?" In such a context, if God replies that he has not changed, we should expect him to mean, "I have not changed in my demand for justice, and I will judge the ungodly."

Instead, we find that the emphasis is on his grace and mercy. Even when we were looking at the previous verses we saw that God was coming, not to judge, but to save his people. The messenger was to prepare the way for Jesus, who would redeem and purify them. We find the same thing here. God emphasizes his immutability to say that he is unchanging in his faithfulness, which is why the people have not been destroyed

for their transgressions.

How gracious of God! The people were accusing him of changing, of having become unfaithful. God replies that he is unchanging precisely in his faithfulness, which is why these very people had not been cast off.

### We Must Change

It is this unchangeableness of God that gives us a chance to change. For, of course, that is what we must do. It is why the passage goes on to speak of repentance or returning to God: "'Return to me, and I will return to you,' says the LoRD Almighty" (v. 7). "How are we to return?" someone asks. That is what the people of Malachi's day asked, and God's response to them in the first instance was that they had robbed him of tithes and offerings. The word "tithe" means "tenth." It refers to that tenth of the people's produce or income that was owed to God for the temple service and other social obligations. The basic tenth was paid to the Levites for their maintenance (Lev. 27:30-33), and from this tenth the Levites themselves paid a tenth to the ministering priests (Num. 18:25-32). Additional tenths may have been paid on other occasions (cf. Deut. 14:28-29). That is what the people had not done. They had undoubtedly made some small contributions to the Levites and temple service as part of their ritualistic practice of religion. But they had not given the "whole tithe" (Mal. 3:10), and they had certainly not presented even what they did give with a willing and thankful heart. They had to change in this area.

Many believers today also need to change. Sometimes in question-and-answer periods I am asked whether Christians today are obliged to tithe. I suspect the questioner wants to know how little he must give to Christian causes and how much he can keep for himself. I reply with what I believe to be a proper statement of the case, namely, that the tithe was an Old Testament regulation designed for the support of a particular class of people. It was not carried over into the New Testament. Nowhere in the New Testament are believers instructed to give a specific tenth or any other proportion of their income to Christian projects.

On the other hand, I also point out that although the tithe is not mentioned, the giving of weekly offerings is (1 Cor. 16:2). And more importantly, it is generally the case that in the New Testament the obligations of the Old Testament legislation are heightened rather than lessened. That is, the law is interpreted in the fullest measure. So while we are not required to give a specific tenth of our income, it is hard to think of a normal Christian, blessed with the fullness of the gospel of Jesus Christ, doing less. Under reasonable circumstances any true believer in Christ should give more than the tenth, for all we have is the Lord's.

I wonder how many believers today even approach that ideal. I wonder if God would not say to most today, "You rob me" (Mal. 3:8). Why should this be? Why should we who have been blessed so abundantly be so ungenerous?

I think the reason is that we really do not trust God to take care of us. We think we have to store up the money for ourselves against the day when money may run out and God will be unable to provide. This was Oswald J. Smith's problem, as he tells about it in his classic story of his introduction to sacrificial missionary giving. He was the newly installed minister of the People's Church of Toronto, Canada, and it was the church's missionary week. He was sitting on the platform when the time came for the ushers to collect the faith promises for the coming year's missionary program. One of them, as he said, had the "audacity" to walk up to the platform and hand him an envelope. He read on it: "In dependence upon God I will endeavor to give \$\_\_\_\_\_ toward the missionary work of the church during the coming year."

He had never seen such a thing before, and he began to protest inwardly. He was the minister. He had a wife and child to support, and at that time he was earning only twenty-five dollars a week. He had never given more than five dollars to missions at any one time previously, and that was only once. He told the Lord, "Lord God, I can't do anything. You know I have nothing. I haven't a cent in the bank. I haven't anything in my pocket. Everything is sky-high in price."

But the Lord seemed to say, "I know all that. I know that you are getting only twenty-five dollars a week. I know that you have nothing in your pocket and nothing in the bank."

"Well, then," he said, "that settles it."

"No, it doesn't," the Lord answered. "I am not asking you for what you have. I am asking you for a faith offering. How much can you trust me for?"

"I guess that's different," said Smith. "How much can I trust you for?"

"Fifty dollars."

"Fifty dollars!" he exclaimed. "That's two weeks' salary. How can I ever get fifty dollars?" But God seemed to be making the matter clear, and with a trembling hand Oswald Smith signed his name and put the amount of fifty dollars on the envelope. He has written since that he still does not know how he paid it. He had to pray each month for four dollars. But God sent the money, and at the end of the year, not only had he paid the whole amount, but he had himself received such a blessing that he doubled the figure at the next year's missionary conference.

Can God take care of us? Can God care for his people and at the same time use their willing generosity to provide for Christian work here and in other lands? Of course he can! To doubt him in this and give little (in some cases, nothing) is to rob God and slander his sovereignty.

#### Keeping God's Day

There is another area in which many professing Christians rob God. It concerns the Lord's Day and what we do with it. Here again we have a situation analogous to the Old and New Testaments' view of tithing. According to the law of Israel, keeping the Sabbath was a solemn obligation (cf. Exod. 20:8-11). It is the most elaborated section of the Decalogue. Indeed, so solemn are these instructions for a proper keeping of the Sabbath that many Christians carefully observe Sunday or the Lord's Day in this fashion. For my part, I believe that there is a marked biblical difference between these two days. The Jewish Sabbath was a day of somber inactivity and reflection. The Christian Sunday is a day of joy, activity, and spiritual expectation.' But the fact that the character of the two days differs (in my opinion) does not mean that Sunday is any less the Lord's Day than the Old Testament Sabbath or that we are any less obligated to use it in a way that honors God.

In actual fact, in this age all our days are God's days-whether Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, or any other day of the week-and we have a special obligation to use Sunday to serve him.

One person who believed this passionately was the great late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Welsh preacher John Elias. In his day there was an annual harvest fair held in the North Wales town of Rhuddlan, a town that has given its name to one of our great hymn tunes. At Rhuddlan Fair, farmers would be hiring laborers, and many things would be sold for work on the land. The fair was held on Sunday, and crowds of people would throng into the town. The bars were all open. There was music and singing. The laws of God were broken in a variety of ways.

Elias knew about Rhuddlan Fair and was increasingly disturbed that people from that part of Wales should be so disobedient to God. One day he decided to go to Rhuddlan Fair to preach. He took a number of Christians with him, and together they arrived at Rhuddlan in the afternoon when the fair was at its busiest. They went to one of the public houses or bars called the New Inn. It had three steps in front leading to a small porch, so John Elias climbed those steps and told the Christians who had accompanied him to sing Psalm 24:

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it,  
the world, and all who live in it....

Who may ascend the hill of the Lord?  
Who may stand in his holy place?  
He who has clean hands and a pure heart,  
who does not lift up his soul to an idol  
or swear by what is false.  
verses 1, 3-4

Surprisingly, it seemed, the noise of the fair began to die down and people by the thousands came close to the New Inn to see what was going on. By the time the singing had stopped there was already a change. Many were struck even by Elias's earnest appearance. Some started to hide what they had purchased.

Elias started to pray. As he prayed tears ran down his cheeks. Silence crept over the crowd. It was astonishing. When Elias had finished praying he opened his Bible and read, "Six days you shall labor, but on the seventh day you shall rest; even during the plowing season and harvest you must rest" (Exod. 34:21). Then he started to preach as a divine messenger sent that day to Rhuddlan Fair. His listeners became afraid, and many began to weep when Elias shouted out, "O robbers! Robbers! You are robbing the Lord; you are robbing my God of his

day!"

When John Elias finished preaching that summer afternoon in 1892, that was the end of the fair. There has never been another Rhuddlan Fair.

I wonder what John Elias would say if he could see how Christians spend Sunday today. Would he not say that we too are robbers of God, that we are robbing God of his day?

#### Living Sacrifices

The end of this matter is that not merely our money or time, but our whole selves-body, soul, and spirit-are God's, and therefore we are to honor God wholly with all we are. Paul wrote, "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body" (1 Cor. 6:19-20). He said, "Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-this is your spiritual act of worship" (Rom. 12:1). That is the essence of it. So long as we are thinking legalistically in terms of financial percentages and portions of the week, we will be exactly like the self-righteous sinners of Malachi's day. We will do little and think it much. We will resent God who, in our judgment, should do more for us. On the other hand, if we give God ourselves as living sacrifices, then the most we give will seem to be little and we will be overwhelmed that God is willing to use us in his service.

Will you try it God's way? Will you put God to the test? This is what God challenges the people to do in Malachi 3:10-12. The text has four parts.

First, God calls for obedience: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house." All spiritual relationships with God start with obedience.

Second, God issues a challenge: "Test me in this."

Third, God accompanies his call and challenge with a promise: "See if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit."

Fourth, God speaks of the ultimate result: "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land."

God's challenge in this great passage from Malachi is identical to the one we have already seen in Haggai, recorded by him approximately seventy-five years before. In Haggai's day the people had been neglecting the rebuilding of the temple, which was God's announced will for them at that period. As a result, God had withheld rain and had not prospered the crops. Much of the first portion of Haggai deals with this situation and challenges the people to take note of it and acknowledge God as the cause. Then God says, "Give careful thought to this from this day on-consider how things were before one stone was laid on another in the LORD's temple. When anyone came to a heap of twenty measures, there were only ten. When anyone went to a wine vat to draw fifty measures, there were only twenty.... From this day on, from this twenty-fourth day of the ninth month, give careful thought to the day when the foundation of the LORD's temple was laid. Give careful thought.... From this day on I will bless you" (Hag. 2:15-16, 18-19). Before they obeyed God the people experienced frustration and physical want. But from that point on they were to experience satisfaction and material blessings-if they obeyed God.

Are you bold enough to accept this challenge personally-as stated either here or in Malachi? Usually we try to shy away from anything as tangible as this, for we are afraid that our faith or testimony will be shaken if we try it and God does not come through. But it is not my idea to put God to the test with obedience. This is God's challenge. It is God who says, "Test me in this ... and see ..." (Mal. 3:10).

Why not obey God in this matter? Why not put God first in the use of your financial resources, your time, above all in what you do with yourself-and see if he will not "throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it"?