

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, JUNE 6, 2021

SERMON: "ARE WE ROBBING GOD?"

TEXT: MALACHI 3:6-12

I am not sure if my life is extraordinary, but I can say that my life has been eventful and filled with many experiences. The other day on Facebook there was a question about "how many places you've lived" so I decided to figure it out. To the best of my knowledge, I have lived 33 different places (dwellings) in two countries, covering 4 provinces and 5 states. From Kindergarten to graduating from grade 12, I attended 6 different schools. I have had a variety of jobs (17 by my count) ranging from waiting tables to singing professionally on television. I have travelled to 2 continents, 5 countries, 39 States and 10 Provinces. When people ask me "Where is your hometown?" or "Where are you from?" generally my answer is "Wherever I hang my hat at the time!"

I wouldn't change much about my life so far, but as I look back through all the moving and changes that I have experienced, there is one place that remained the same for much of my life. That was where my Grandparents Sponagle lived. My grandfather was a fisheries officer and for all my life lived in the small, coastal fishing community of Port Bickerton, Nova Scotia. For me, Port Bickerton was pretty much a little taste of heaven. Port Bickerton your postcard perfect Atlantic fishing community. We would visit my grandparents once or twice a year (often we lived quite a ways from them) and nothing would really change. Their house was on the water and as a child, I would spend hours down at the beach, collecting shells, searching for sea urchins, star fish, and sand dollars. There were large rocks that we would play on for hours. The real treat was to walk to a nearby beach that was basically a massive wall of ocean-smoothed stones that had formed a huge beach. We would make the 10 minute walk to the "rock beach" and sit and watch the waves. Port Bickerton was the one

“unchangeable” place in my life. I can’t wait for the time when I can take my children there.

It is hard to believe that it has been about 12 years since I last visited Nova Scotia for my grandfather’s memorial service. His house is pretty much the same...but it is interesting that even in the sameness, nothing stays the same. On that visit, I took my wife down to the beach. Everything is so much smaller. The large rocks that we played on seemed so small. Even the “rock beach” is not as mighty...but it is still a wonderful taste of heaven.

Today we come to the fifth argument between God and His people. The people are not only questioning how God works and his relationship to them, but they are now attacking His very character.

Let’s look at our reading today taken from Malachi 3:6-12:

⁶“I am the LORD, and I do not change. That is why you descendants of Jacob are not already destroyed. ⁷ Ever since the days of your ancestors, you have scorned my decrees and failed to obey them. Now return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.

“But you ask, ‘How can we return when we have never gone away?’

⁸“Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me!

“But you ask, ‘What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?’

“You have cheated me of the tithes and offerings due to me. ⁹ You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me. ¹⁰ Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies, “I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you

won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test! ¹¹ Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies. ¹² "Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies.

The arguments are continuing between God and Israel. In our latest portion of scripture, the discussion goes like this:

1. God: "I am faithful. Return to me and I will return to you!"
People: "How can we return...we never left?"
2. God: "You've cheated me!"
People: "When have we cheated you?"

The people are not merely arguing with God, their arguments are a direct attack against God's character! Their argument is filled with irony. They think God has stopped loving them. They accuse God of not being faithful because their lives right now are going down the proverbial toilet! They believe that they are God's people so their lives should be filled with all the abundant blessings that has been promised them. The irony is the fact that they have broken the covenant in every conceivable way! They don't follow God's rules for worship and sacrifice. They divorce faithful wives and replace them with idolaters. They mistreat and take advantage of the "least of these" within their community. The people have broken their covenant with God (again!) and are trying to pass the buck back to God – and God is calling them on it!

I AM FAITHFUL!

God starts Malachi reminding them of His love for them. Now he reminds them of another major attribute...He is faithful!

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God has upheld His side of the covenant regardless of habitual sin and faithlessness of his children. In chapter 1, the people questions God’s love. His response remains the same in this section. How can Israel know God is faithful? Simple! They still exist as a people! If you analyzed how the people have shown their love and faithfulness, you would quickly see that they continually flunk the test. They are rebellious and disobedient time and time again, century after century after century! Through all the rebellion God has never changed! What the people fail to see is the “two-edged sword” nature of God’s faithfulness to the covenant relationship. His faithfulness blesses those who are faithful, but it also curses those who are rebellious. The people are taking exception to living a hard life without admitting that their actions are the reason their lives are not what they should be.

All through this God offers hope!

God invites the people to return to Him and He would return to them. It is about reconciliation. This is the way it has always been. Remember the words of 2 Chronicles 7:14:

¹⁴ Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.

God gave this promise to Solomon at the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem. It was a confirmation once again that if the people are obedient, God will bless them, but if they are disobedient and follow other gods, God will turn His back on them until they repent. The people of Malachi's day would have this knowledge ingrained into the very fabric of their being, but they are choosing to selectively repress it.

ROBBING GOD

Part 2 of this argument/conversation is when God gives the people an example of how they have left him and what they can tangibly do to return to him. God's example takes the form of a negative declaration, *"you've cheated/robbed me?"* and the people reply, *"How have we cheated/robbed You?"*

Several weeks ago we talked about knowing the context of a scripture to properly understand it. We saw how pastors and laypeople alike will take Malachi 2:16 which has God declaring "I hate divorce" and turn it into a for all time, for all people declaration without putting it into its proper context. The passage was not about divorce but was rather an illustration of the people's rebellion against God. Sadly, the same happens with this section of Malachi. The offending passage is this:

¹⁰ Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my Temple. If you do," says the LORD of Heaven's Armies, "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put me to the test!

This is the other passage that will be quoted by people, that will be taken out of its context and used as a proof text for the act of tithing or will be used by the charlatans of what is known as "prosperity" theology also known as the "word-faith" movement and commonly referred to as "name it – claim it" theology. Greed is commonly at the root of the belief that if I put \$5 in the offering plate, God will give me back \$50. The fact is that this passage is not really the best one for a sermon on tithing. As much as you can get some principles from it, it has everything to do with our rebellion or obedience and God's unchanging faithfulness.

Once again, God is giving the people a tangible example of how they are currently breaking the covenant with God. Because of their rebellion, they have turned from God and need to return. This section does not imply that tithing was their only sin, it was just an easily provable one for their consideration.

The tithe was considered to be 10% of what a person earned and it is what Abraham gave Melchizedek even before it was instituted in the Law of Moses. The Law of Moses instructed the people to give a 10th (the “tithe” in Malachi 3:8) and that it was “holy to the LORD” (Lev. 27:30). From this tithe the Levites paid a “tenth” to the priests (Num. 18:26-28). The tithe was also used for those in need such as the widows and the orphans and others (Deut. 14:28-29). The “offerings” were the portions of the animal sacrifices that were used to feed the priests. “Offerings” were also special offerings above the tithe that were given for special purposes (Ex. 25:2-7). The tithes and offerings were given to God as an acknowledgement that He is the Creator and that all is His. We are to give God the best because that is what He deserves! The people were robbing God of both the tithe and offering and thus declaring through their actions that the LORD is not worthy, and they do not consider His Lordship something to be recognized. How quickly the people’s hearts have changed through their rebellion. It was in their recent past, when they returned to Jerusalem from their exile, that Israel’s revival began with a joyful, spontaneous giving of their best as they rebuilt the temple (Neh. 10:38; 2 Chr. 31:5-19).

FOR TODAY

The principle being taught and that we need to take note of is the fact that God is the only one worthy of glory and honour and power and we have a responsibility, as His children, to offer our very best to God. This is not just about monetary resources, but rather the best of ALL that we are and that we have and that we do! It is a heart issue! Once again, we are still governed by the “Greatest Commandment”:

‘Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. ³⁰ And you must love the LORD your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.” (Mark 12:29-30).

We live in a world that we have made overly complicated and busy. Statistics tell us that church attendance in North America is dropping at an alarming rate (when we were able to attend). Regular attendance is now considered to be going to church twice a month as opposed to each week. There can be many reasons for this, but complacency and busyness accounts for a large part of this drop. Those who watch the Christian culture carefully, are worried that we will see a mass drop in attendance due to the fact that people are now so use to watching an online service from the comfort of their homes that they will choose to continue the practice once the pandemic is over. We have always been created to be a community. We are meant to be together. We are at our best for God when we stand shoulder to shoulder in the work of the gospel. Look at the description of the Acts church:

⁴² All the believers devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching, and to fellowship, and to sharing in meals (including the Lord’s Supper), and to prayer.

⁴³ A deep sense of awe came over them all, and the apostles performed many miraculous signs and wonders. ⁴⁴ And all the believers met together in one place and shared everything they had. ⁴⁵ They sold their property and possessions and shared the money with those in need. ⁴⁶ They worshiped together at the Temple each day, met in homes for the Lord’s Supper, and shared their meals with great joy and generosity— ⁴⁷ all the while praising God and enjoying the goodwill of

all the people. And each day the Lord added to their fellowship those who were being saved. (Acts 2:42-47).

Do you feel far from God today? Examine your heart and see if you have stopped giving God the best of all that you have and all that you are. This is where revival usually begins. We turn back to God. We acknowledge his unchanging faithfulness and love, even when we fail repeatedly. We repent of our rebellion, our complacency, and our lack of love for the world around us.

Do we want revival and renewal in our church? Do we want to participate in growing the kingdom of God? Then corporately, together, we dedicate ourselves to giving of the best that we are. We don't look to our own comfort and strive to do things "the way we have always done it!" We seek God's will and we creatively step out of our comfort zones to engage the world that is seeking the Saviour. We are generous, give of the best that we are and that we have, and we

Do you feel that you have fallen too far from God or somehow your past is so rebellious that God could never forgive you? This is the promise of God found in Malachi! If you truly and sincerely want to be a follower of Jesus, there is no sin so great that He won't forgive you. Not only will he forgive you, but He will also erase your sin and never hold it against you. He promised that if you return to Him, He will return to you!

Let's pray...