

Will You Test God?

STEWARDSHIP IS A MATTER OF TRUST

Malachi 3:6-18; Luke 6:38, 46-49

January 27, 2002

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A United States congressman, sitting in a fast-food restaurant with his son, smelled the fries he had purchased for the little guy. Leaning over, the father asked, "Could I have a few of those?" The son said, "No!" and shielded the fries from his dad. The father felt anger swell within. He thought, *"My son has an attitude problem! He forgot who gave him those fries. I really don't need his fries. I could purchase more myself. In fact, I could bury him with fries if I wanted to."* The congressman then realized, *"That's like God."* God doesn't need what we give, but when we fail to return what God asks, it shows that we have an attitude problem.

Stewardship has a lot to do with attitude, especially the attitude of trust. We've been discussing that the past four weeks. The first week we considered the question, *"Can you trust God?"* The second week we asked, *"Can God trust you?"* Last week we discussed how to cultivate trust. Today we consider God's plea from Malachi that says, "Test me."

In the book of Malachi, God was angered by the actions of the Israelites. God was frustrated because, though his people paid him homage, they did not trust him. They prayed, worshiped and gave money, but they did not obey. The people thought they were honoring God with their religiosity, but their low level of trust caused the people to actually **rob** God. They were confused about who is the owner and who is the manager of the earth and its abundance. They forgot that all good things come from God. When God asked them to return a tenth of their income, they fudged and returned less. God charged them with stealing.

Now, you cannot steal what you own. You only steal what you don't own. The charge of robbing God only makes sense if God really is the owner of all that we make and possess.

Incidentally, no one **gives** a tithe. The Bible never talks about **giving** a tithe! You don't **give** an owner what is already his. In tithing, you **return** to the owner the portion he requests. We don't **give** a tithe, we **return** a tithe. Many Christians miss this truth. They take ten percent of their income and divide it up between many causes. That is not tithing. The tithe is returned to the owner. It is not divided up as the manager sees fit. It is

returned. It is not to be managed. The rest of the income, the 90% is to be managed, but the 10 percent is to be returned. In tithing you establish an economic partnership with God where you return to him through your church one tenth of your income. The remaining 90 percent is to be spent, saved or given away remembering that you are God's manager.

Low trust caused the Israelites to **rob** God and **defame** God. When they failed to tithe, they discredited God's character as a loving person and his ability as a powerful being. They profaned God's name. Profanity is not merely irreverent speech like swearing. Profanity is the degradation of God's name in speech and in **deed**. God was degraded by the Israelites' gifts. Therefore God confronted the Israelites:

"You have said harsh things against me," says the LORD. "Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?' You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements..." (Malachi 3:13-14, NIV)

Even in utter sincerity, we say what we **want** to believe, but we do what we **actually** believe. You may say that God is trustworthy and great, but if you don't return the tithe God requests, you proclaim that there is no gain in trusting and serving God.

In Malachi 3:7 God told his people through the prophet:

"Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?'"

Because of low trust, the people **turned away**. That's what low trust does. You turn away and look elsewhere for help. When you turn away, your eyes no longer see what they need to see, and you can no longer do what you need to do. You are on the wrong course. **Separation** and **alienation** follow.

God called to the Israelites: *"Return to me!"* How were the people to return? They were to **test** God to see if he was worthy of their trust! They were to **return** the **whole** tithe.

Last week, we mentioned that you can't tithe a penny, but you can tithe anything over a dime. The truth is that most of us can tithe because we make more than a dime. Whether we can live on what we make after we return the tithe is a matter of trust, and this is exactly what Jesus addressed.

Frequently in his teachings, Jesus tells us to stop worrying, that our heavenly Father does make a difference. In Luke, chapter six, Jesus gave us a call. He called for **faith!** We're to look to God not people for our reward. Our heavenly Father really makes the difference. Jesus called for **action!** GIVE AND IT WILL BE GIVEN TO YOU! Our deeds will bring **fruit** and prove **wise** in time. You've got to act, Jesus said, because if you do act, you'll reap and if you don't, you'll suffer when the time comes. Jesus called for **love!** He called for love because even some who tithed were missing God's love. They were into legalism. Legalism asks, "How **little** can I give and not be judged?" Love asks, "How **much** can I give and still be the good manager God calls me to be?"

Repeatedly Jesus said, *"Trust your father, he will provide!" "Look at the sparrows, God cares for them. Look at the lilies, God arrays them in beauty. How much more does God care for you? Trust your Father's love!"*

Jesus knew that trust was the key issue for us. God knows that as well. That's why he requests that you return to him a tenth. He knows that tithing is a bellwether of trust. God knows this is a major indicator of whether you will trust him or turn away.

When God's Spirit spoke through the prophet Malachi, he said, *"Don't fudge. Don't rationalize. Don't excuse."* God said:

"Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "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. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty. (Malachi 3:10-12, NIV)

This is the only place in the Bible where we are actually told to test God. Everywhere else we're told not to. In Scripture, there are three types of tests. There's the test that **challenges** the ability and love of God. The Israelites got into trouble for testing God because when they grumbled about food and water in the desert and turned back to Egypt, they were challenging God's character and power. When Jesus refused to test God during temptation, when he refused to jump off the pinnacle of the temple, he refused to **try** God's patience. He was not about to manipulate God and **try** the patience of God. In contrast, the Bible reveals that God often tests us. He's not trying our patience or challenging us; instead, he's checking us out. The third type of test is to **check** the nature of a person.

When God says *"Test me!"*, he's saying, *"Check me out! Find out for yourself that I am trustworthy. I will do what I promise."*

God, the owner, promises us managers three things. First, God will **open** the floodgates of heaven. God is already poised to bless us. Like water pushing against a floodgate, blessing for us is pent up, ready to be unleashed, waiting for our act of faith. All this pressure to bless you comes from God's intense love for you. It's an outgrowth of his love. Second, God promises to **protect** the work of your hands. There's no platter principle with God. God is not a waiter with a platter for you. God does not arrive like a bellhop at your door with goodies. Instead God protects and prospers your work. God expects you to work, to produce, to manage on behalf of him. Third, God promises to **demonstrate** visibly his favor for you. Others will speak of you as blessed.

Last week, we shared that there are five steps to trusting God: *Taking an inventory, Recognizing God as source, Understanding God's principles, Surrendering everything to God, and Testing God's promises.* That last step is critical. Regardless of what we say, we don't believe the ice is safe until we test it; and we don't believe God's word or love until we test him. *Any notion of trust is pure bluster until we test God and his word.*

When I brought this subject up in another church, one of my young leaders talked with his brother about tithing. His brother was struggling financially like so many of us. His wife was trying to establish her own business and was having difficulty attracting clients. The brother said it was really tough to tithe. It felt like such a risk. With tears swelling in his eyes, this young man told my leader that within a few months after they began to tithe, the wife had more clients than she could handle and they witnessed more blessing financially than they imagined.

I'm not asking anyone to tithe today. I'm not! God is. God is asking you. God says, *"It's all mine! You're managing it for me. Trust me, return a tithe. Test me in this!"*