

The Covenant Pulpit



Malachi 3:6-12

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Dr. Robert A. Petterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church
6926 Trail Boulevard, Naples, Florida 34108
(239) 597-3464

www.covenantnaples.com

I want to be Ty Pennington.

Ty is the wild and wacky host of the ABC television mega hit *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*. Every week Ty, and his team of Hollywood designers, show up at rundown house and tell a needy-but-deserving family that they are getting an extreme home makeover.

The lucky family is sent off on an exotic vacation and hundreds of workers descend like an army of synchronized ants to demolish the old shack and erect a magnificent designer home in its place. Racing against the clock, the team decorates the interior in a mind-boggling fusion of *Better Homes and Garden* and Disneyland theme park.

Seven days later, the family returns in a limousine to thousands of cheering spectators. Ty points at a huge bus that blocks their view and leads the crowd in a chant that has become famous across America: "Driver, move that bus!" The bus pulls away, exposing their new designer home, and the family goes berserk with unbridled joy.

As the awestruck family explores their spectacular new digs, a smiling Ty keeps popping up in almost every room. "Well guys, what do you think?" They almost always fall into his arms weeping with gratitude. "Oh Ty, how can we ever thank you for what you've done for us?"

Ty has the best job in America. He gets to give away homes full of Kenmore appliances and brand-name furniture, all paid for by Sears and other corporate sponsors. He is lavished with love and hugs for spending huge sums of someone else's money.

I remember when I got to be Ty Pennington for a week. A parishioner donated \$20,000 and told me to give it away to needy people at Christmas. For a week I got to give out checks to overjoyed folks. A staff person said, "You must be having the time of your life." I replied, "You bet! And the best part is I'm giving away someone else's money."

The week I played Ty Pennington, I had no hesitation giving away that money because it wasn't mine to begin with. It's easy to give away someone else's money. But it's so much more painful to part with that which belongs to us. If we really understood that everything we possess really belongs to God, wouldn't it be easier to give it away? It might even be fun to give it away. And here's the difference between Ty Pennington and us: he only has restricted access to the limited funds of

Sears, but we have unrestricted access to the unlimited resources of heaven. This is what an Old Testament prophet says in Malachi 3:10:

“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.”

Malachi makes an amazing promise to us:

**Not only do we get to spend God’s money
...we get rewarded for doing it.**

E.F. Hutton couldn’t make this kind of promise. But the one who calls himself “the Lord Almighty” can. In a world of failed sub-prime loans and shaky investments, he knows that you are skeptical about such a deal. So he adds a challenge in verse ten: “...test me in this...” It’s almost as if he is saying, “I double-dare you. You say that you believe in my Word. You claim to be a person of faith. Then put your money where your mouth is. Put me to the test.”

I love the bravado in God’s challenge: “...and see if I won’t throw open the floodgates of heaven...” A cosmic flood of blessings is surging, shoving, and slamming against the gates of heaven. Can you hear the crackling and splintering of those gates as they strain to hold back the flood? Malachi 3:10 says that this flood has “...so much blessing that you will not have enough room for it.” Spend God’s money on *his* purposes and you’ll bring unbridled joy to our Lord, to other people, and to yourself. And, on top of that, God will open the gates and pour out blessings on you...all for spending *his* money.

God is speaking through Malachi to Jews who have come home after 70 years of exile in Babylon. Almost a century before, Babylonian conquerors left the cities of Israel in ruins. A succession of invading armies have hacked away vineyards and chopped down fruit trees. Once-verdant fields have been possessed by encroaching desert. Ancient Palestine is like the Old West, untamed and lawless. These are tough times, and the returning exiles are discouraged.

Through the prophet Malachi, God is speaking to people who couldn’t be in worse financial trouble. It would be easy for them to reason, “I’ll start giving money to God’s work *after* my financial situation gets

better.” God is saying that giving shouldn’t wait *until* things get better, but it is the key to *making* things better.

This is one of the reasons I’m so excited about our *Bridge to the Future* campaign. It would be easier to wait and move forward in more certain times. But we have a chance to test God’s promises here in Malachi 3:10. I believe that, over the next few years, we are going to experience the greatest faith adventure in our history as a church. Here are the facts we need to grab hold of as we step out in faith:

1. Our giving is rooted in God’s unchangeableness. Look at what he says about himself in verses 6&7:

“I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. 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...”

Catch God’s claim about himself in verse six: “I the Lord do not change.” The unchangeableness of God is at the core of his very being. He is the same yesterday, today, and forever. His *person* never changes. His *purposes* never change. His *plans* never change. His *principles* never change. His *promises* never change. God never flip-flops. He is a covenant-keeping God.

The complaint of God’s people in Malachi’s day is that God *has* changed. They look at their tough situation and start grouching: God used to take care of his people, but not anymore. He used to do miracles, but not anymore. There was a time when he poured out his blessings on Israel, but not anymore.

Here’s the logical extension of their thinking about God: if he has changed, then *everything* has changed. The principles and rules of the Scripture have changed with the times. The Old Scriptures said, “One husband married to one wife for life.” The Old Scriptures said, “Believers shouldn’t marry nonbelievers.” But, if you look at Malachi two, you will see that Jewish men are divorcing their wives and moving in with pagan women. Old rules about morality are now passé. Not only do they think that precepts about the sanctity of marriage are outdated, so are the tithing rules set down by God in the beginning. As far as Malachi’s contemporaries are concerned, changing cultural views and tough economic times allow us to readjust biblical theology.

Things haven't changed much in 2400 years. The other day I watched a two year-old DVD of the sixth edition of the *Star Wars* series. It's called *The Revenge of the Sith*. For the uninitiated, in a galaxy long ago the republic is collapsing as the dark empire emerges. The only hope is an ancient sect of warriors wielding light sabers: the *Jedi* knights. On the dark side of the force are the *Sith*: an ancient order of evil knights. There is a climatic light saber duel between the *Sith* knight Darth Vader and Obi-Wan Kenobi, the *Jedi* master. Obi-Wan (the hero in white) screams at Darth Vader (the evil guy in black), "The trouble with you *Siths* is that you cling to your absolutes!" Producer and director, George Lucas is making a statement to the heartland of America: people who believe in moral absolutes are the evil ones who would enslave us all. If you believe that God is unchangeable, or that the principles of your Holy Book are absolute, then you are one of the *Siths* of our age—maybe even Darth Vader. The message of George Lucas is so appealing: Wouldn't you rather be an enlightened Obi-Wan Kenobi?

In so many areas, today's *Church of the Jedi Knight* is abandoning the absolutes of Scripture. And one of those is in the area of regular giving to the church. With great sincerity and passion many Christians will say that tithing was only for the Old Testament believer. I invite you to look again at the words of verse six: "I the Lord do not change." He tells us here there ways that he doesn't change:

1) **He never stops seeking relationships.** Discouraged and bitter people have turned their backs on their God, and he has every right to destroy them. But he says in verse five, "I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." He has always been a loving and merciful God. Psalm 103:10 says of his grace, "He does not treat us as our sins deserve." So God cries out to his people in verse seven, "Return to me and I will return to you." God wants a passionate relationship with his people. He also wants a relationship with billions of lost people, both here and around the world.

The very heart of God is captured in John 3:16: "For God so loved the world that he *gave* his Only Begotten Son that whoever believes in him might not perish but have everlasting life." God gives that which he loves most: his Only Son. He gives sacrificially. Literally, he gives until it hurts. If you want to see how much, go to that lonely hill outside Jerusalem and watch the agony of the Cross. Evangelism cannot be separated from giving. Those who share their faith most passionately,

give away their money most freely. We have told you that our *Bridge to the Future* vision is about creating a campus that would help us effectively reach the next generation with the gospel of Christ. But there is a deeper issue in this campaign: it is calling us to be transformed into the image of our God who gives away himself to bring people into relationship with himself.

2) **He never stops feeding the hungry.** He says in verse 10 that we should bring tithes and offerings "...that there may be food in my house." In Israel there were storehouses set aside in every town. People were asked to bring the first tenth of their crops and livestock to their local storehouses. Those goods were used to take care of the full time workers in the temple and synagogues as well as widows, orphans, and those in financial distress. God wanted to train his people to be as compassionate like he was toward needy people.

In verse nine God says, "You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me." Our nation is under the curse of sin and death. So are the nations of the world. Mostly, they are starving for the Bread of Life. In Hosea 4:6 God says, "My people are destroyed for the lack of knowledge." The place where Jesus was born was called *Bethlehem*. In the Hebrew it literally means "the house of bread." We want Covenant to be a house where more people can be fed good bread, and then equipped to go out of here to feed others. That's also what our *Bridge to the Future* vision is all about.

He never stops working through his house. In verse 10 he says, "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse..." There are lots of good places and causes where you can give away God's money. Joyce and I have given to many parachurch organizations like Campus Crusade and Young Life, as well as charities, political causes, and mission outreaches. But we always want to give our first and best to the *storehouse*: the local church which sustains us and ministers to our family. For all its flaws, God still ministers most effectively through a local church that invests in the spiritual life of its community. Several studies have shown that 90% of Christians worldwide get ninety percent of their discipleship the life of their local church. More than 85 percent of conversions to Christ do not come from mass crusades, parachurch organizations, or foreign missionaries, but from local churches ministering in their communities. The local church is still Christ's primary means of changing this world. If you want to make your best investment in the future of God's

kingdom, make it in the church that nurtures your soul, and prepares you to make an impact in your daily network of relationships.

Not only does God never change in his way of bringing people into relationship with him, feeding them, and in using his church to send them out to feed a dying world, he continues to reward us when we make an unchangeable commitment to his unchangeable call:

2. Our giving always brings spectacular returns. What he said through Malachi 2400 years ago is still true today:

1) **This is more than a trickle; it is a flood.** Verse 10 says, "I will throw open the *floodgates* of heaven..." Floods overwhelm. They sweep us away. No wonder God says that his blessing will be so great that "...you will not have room enough for it." I love that phrase in verse ten: "I will throw open..." This is a picture of excitement and joy. God won't just open the floodgates a crack at a time, but he will throw them open with total abandonment (as if you could do anything else when there is a flood behind the gates). I think that the greatest blessing is to get a heart like God's. When you begin to throw open the gates of your heart, because he has produced a flood of *John 3:16* love inside you, then you will really know what it means to be blessed with God's joy.

2) **What you don't see is what you get.** In verse 11 God promises, "I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your field will not cast their fruit." Sometimes we give and don't see immediate results after we give. But God is saying here, sometimes our blessings are not in what we get, but in what we *don't* get. They are not in what we see, but in what we *don't* see. God is saying to an ancient agricultural people, "If you will give away a generous (even sacrificial) portion of what I have given you, then I will keep the locusts, boll weevils, mold, mildew, disease, plague, and robbers away from destroying your fields or decimating your flocks." We have modern day pests that destroy our finances: the unexpected medical bill, another rise in gas prices, the transmission that goes out, or the bump in property taxes. There are a thousand ways that our lives can be devoured. Sometimes we say, "I gave to God, and I didn't see anything in return." But we will never know how many disasters never fell on us because God was holding them at bay. When we praise him for all the good things that he has given us, we should remember to thank him for all the bad things we didn't know never happened to us!

3) **You will be blessed to be a blessing.** Verse 12 says, "'Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,' says the Lord Almighty." John 3:16 says, "...for God so loved the *world*..." The world consists of all those outside the four walls of the church. They make up the *nations* that God talks about in verse twelve. We want to reach those nations for Christ. We want our own country, and our own church, to be "...a delightful land..." God has given us so much. But he hasn't blessed us so that we might hold on to our blessings. In fact, according to verse 10, he wants to bless you with such a flood (and he has) that "...you will not have enough room for it." In other words, the blessings will come flooding in so powerfully we will have to let go of them so they continue downstream to bless others. What will change the nations, and cause them to call us blessed, as verse 12 promises? It will happen when they see the floodgates of our own hearts burst forth open in generosity towards others. The God who tells us in Exodus 22:29 to hold nothing back, is the God who held nothing back according to John 3:16. The people of Covenant have been blessed to be a blessing!

3. So here's the question: Will you test God? Again the challenge in verse ten: "Test me in this, and see..." We will never see the full extent of what he can do until we test the full extent of what we will do? His challenge calls for our commitment. Many have already stepped out in faith in this *Bridge to the Future* adventure. Already some 50 families have committed to more than \$5 million that we might reach the next generation. Now it's time for the rest of us to step out in faith and spend some of God's money so that we can experience his joy. It is only our first step, but get ready for the floodgates to open.

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