

Stop Thief!  
Malachi 3:8-12

As the family drove to their favorite restaurant after church on Sunday each member began to comment about the church service. Dad complained that the sermon was too long and boring. Mom thought the organist played too loud. Grandma said she couldn't hear much (of course she insisted on sitting in the "family pew" at the *back* of the church). Johnny complained that he couldn't see over the big hat of the woman in front of him. Then perky four-year-old Amanda piped up, "But you gotta admit, it was a pretty good show for a dollar."

This illustration would be funny if not for the fact that this is the way many church going people think. Did you notice, not once did the characters in the story reflect on the privilege and opportunity to worship and meet with God. Instead, there are only complaints about what was or was not received or experienced. "I didn't get my monies worth" seems to be the attitude.

If you are giving money to the church in order to get something in return, STOP giving! The church is not here to sell you anything. And if you are putting money into the offering plate because God needs your money, STOP! God does not need your money. The Psalmist tells us, "*I have no need of a bull from your stall or of goats from your pens, for every animal of the forest is mine, every cattle on a thousand hills is mine*" (Ps.50:9-10). Besides, don't you think the Creator of the universe could again speak into existence anything he needs? Satan tried to tempt Jesus by questioning his Godhood when he said, "Command these stones to become bread." Jesus could have, he had the ability to do so. But he responded that there is something more important than bread, something more valuable than things. What is of heavenly value and what is of earthly value are two different things.

There once was a very rich man who was sure the adage "you can't take it with you" just had to have a loop-hole. So, he had a conversation with God and asked to take something with him. God granted his request. As the man prepared to die he began to fill a security case with bills.

But then he began to wonder, “What currency do they use in heaven? The Yen? The Dollar? I know. I’ll convert all my cash to gold bullion.” Upon his death he was greeted at heaven’s gates by St. Peter who promptly told him, “You can’t take anything in with you.” “Ah, but sir,” the man replied, “I have an arrangement with God.” “Well,” replied Peter, “let’s see what you’ve got.” So the man opened it and revealed the shining gold bars. “Pavement,” exclaimed Peter. “Why do they always bring pavement.”

To God, the things of this world that we hold of great value are of no more worth than the ground we walk on. The apostle John, in Revelation, talks of streets of gold and gates of pearls and diamonds and jewels everywhere and we envision a place more glorious than the Taj-ma-Hal. But to God these things are worthless - mere building materials. What is of value to God he has been trying to tell us all through the book of Malachi. You are valuable to him. I am valuable to him. The relationship that we have with God is what is valuable to him.

Why then does God say in Malachi that we are robbing him? (**Read Text**) We give to God so we can care for one another. Bring in the full tithe to have food in storehouses? God doesn’t need food. The tithe was to be given to care for priests, widows, orphans, & poor. If God does not need anything what are we robbing of God?

1. *We are stealing from God the rightful response he deserves because of what God has already done for us. President Lincoln made these remarks in his Proclamation of 1863, and they are still true: We have been the recipients of the choicest bounties of heaven; we have grown in numbers as no other nation has ever grown. But we have forgotten God. We have forgotten the gracious Hand which preserved us in peace and multiplied and enriched and strengthened us, and we have vainly imagined, in the deceitfulness of our hearts, that all these blessings were produced by some superior wisdom and virtue of our own. Intoxicated with unbroken success, we have*

*become too self-sufficient to feel the necessity of redeeming and preserving grace, too proud to pray to the God that made us.*

2. *We are stealing the respect that is due God.* So often we pay all of our bills and fulfill our wants and then we drop what's left over in the offering plate, provided we have what we think we will need or want for the rest of the week. When we fail to bring in the whole tithe we've said, "Me first, then you can have what's left." Really, did God give us what was left over? More accurately, we are placing ourselves and our needs ahead of God and his ability to provide. Sadly, the church does this as well. How often have we declined to do ministry in and with our community because we don't think we have the resources to do so. It's time to give God the Respect he is due!

3. *We are robbing God of our trust.* Although there had been a push to have it removed, our currency still has imprinted on it "In God We Trust." But do we? How much does God have to do to prove he can be trusted? The Israelites of Malachi's day had experienced God's love and power in many awesome ways. They also had all the stories of how God had, time and again, come to Israel's aid. But still that was not enough to cement their relationship with God.

God has proven his love and commitment to us in similar ways. God sent his only Son, Jesus, who lived and died and rose again so that we can have an eternal relationship with Him. We have all experienced his bounty in our lives. We have called out to God in times of crisis – serious illness or risky surgery of our self or a loved one, financial struggle or loss of job, driving home in a blistering snowstorm – and no matter what the predicament God was there to meet our need in accordance with his good will for our best interest. Surely we can trust God enough to give the first tenth. As an act of trust, I will ask the leadership team of our church to trust God with the first tenth of our income, your tithes to the church, by giving that first tenth to the ministry shares of the greater UM church.

4. *We keep from God of the honor of blessing.* God wants nothing more than to bless his children with everything they need and in such an abundance that it cannot be mistaken that the blessing is of God. Jesus said, *“I came that they may have life and have it to the full”* (Jn.10:10). But God can only give when we are willing to receive. David wrote, *“Take delight in the Lord and he will give you your heart’s desires”* (Ps.37:4). Our ability to receive is dependent upon our willingness to put God first. God has so much to give us, so much love to fill us, such a desire to know us and that we know and love him. We must be willing to let go of the control over our lives and the stuff of life that we so tight-fistedly hang onto before we can really experience this relationship.

So desirous is God to bless his children, so eager that we truly love him the way he loves us, so wanting to be our God that God says, *“test me.”* The Contemporary English Version captures the Hebrew well, *“I challenge you to put me to the test.”* This is the only place in the Bible God allows us to challenge him, *“If you will let go of the cares and worries of your life by letting go of the stuff that you most hold onto, including your money, and if you will give to me the full tithe (ten percent) of what is mine, then I will open the doors of heaven and flood you with blessing after blessing.”*

I know a man who wasn’t so sure about this challenge of God. He and his family lived from paycheck to paycheck giving God only from what was left. It was hard to let go of the control. But he wanted a real relationship with God. And besides, God had made the challenge; if anyone could keep it God could. He began writing a check for the first tenth of the paycheck as soon as it was deposited. There were times he wondered if he had done the right thing, but he remained faithful. And God began to bless. Boxes of clothes for their children came by UPS from friends long since moved away. Friends called offering venison just as the last pound of hamburger was put in the frying pan. One Christmas, money was real tight and the family contented themselves to a present-less Christmas only to receive a money order in the mail given

anonymously. Once, when a new car wasn't really needed, another newer and fancier car was offered for the price of what the old one would sell for. The list truly goes on and on.

But the real blessing was that for the first time the family was free to really experience God and his love. They trusted that love, gave God thanks for *all* his blessing, not just the stuff, and came to respect and know God more. They gave to God the cares and concerns for this world's life so that they could have God's life. They were and remain faithful, giving ten percent and more of all God has given them. And God opened the doors of heaven and blessed them with heaven's greatest treasure – an abundant life, an ever increasing and loving relationship with God and His people and the desires of their hearts. The story I share with you is true. I know because it is mine and my family's story.

What kind of relationship would you like with God? Is something getting in the way? I challenge you to commit the first 10%, your tithe to God through this church and see if God doesn't open the storehouses of heaven to meet your every need while at the same time blessing you with heaven's greatest treasure – an ever increasing and loving relationship with God.