

PostExilicProphets 22-05-25a

Good evening, welcome to the Wednesday Night Bible Study at Grace and Truth Bible Church. We are continuing our study in the book of Malachi. We have come to chapter three, where God asks the question, will a man rob God? In verse eight, Malachi 3, eight.

You have robbed me. You say, in what way have we robbed you in tithes and offerings? This is really at the climax of the charges that God brings to his people in this book. So it seems like a good place to focus our attention and make sure we understand how it is that the people in this generation were robbing God to ensure that we don't inadvertently do the same thing.

Let's take a moment to ask God's blessing on our fellowship and on our study, and we will dive in. Father, it is an unending source of wonder and gratitude in our hearts to see the way that you take care of us, watch over us, orchestrate the events of our lives, the pleasures, the challenges, the tests, the opportunities. It is such a comfort and encouragement to be confident of your involvement as our heavenly Father.

We thank you for the Lord Jesus Christ who has made this relationship with you possible, has given us hope for this life and the life to come. We pray that as we look at your word together this evening, that the Holy Spirit will help us to see where it is pertinent and applicable for us to convict us, to pull us up short, to take the blinders off of our eyes so that we can see clearly how we can more fully and effectively be followers of the Lord Jesus in his perfect example of faithfulness and obedience so that we will be prepared to serve you and to bear the fruit of the Spirit both now and in the ages to come. We pray all these things in Jesus' name, amen.

You have robbed me in tithes and offerings, tithes and offerings. We're going to take a look at each of those subjects one per session tonight to be sure that by the time we pack up and go our separate ways this evening, we will know exactly what is a tithe, what is an offering, what are the similarities, what are the differences, what was their purpose and what is their value in terms of whatever you wanna say, symbolism, metaphor, observation, interpretation, application for us as church-age believers. These issues with God's people, Israel, are recorded so that we can look at them, be educated by them and learn from their mistakes so that we can make new and creative and unforeseen, unheard of mistakes of our own instead of being tired old boring sinners who do the same old thing.

If we're going to fail, let's fail creatively. That's my feeling. But if by coming to an understanding of these, and it's been a while since we've looked at some portions of the Levitical code to see exactly why God prescribed these in the first place.

If God's got the cattle on a thousand hills, if he's got everything that he needs and he is our provider, why would we as God's people, whether it's Israel or the church, why would we need to somehow send something his way? Is he needy? Is he insufficient? Does he just demand it for some inscrutable reason? I think the reasons are scrutable. And so we're gonna see if we

can inscrutinate them tonight and come to a place of application so that as we go forward, we can ensure that when God says, will a man rob me, that's not us. Whatever it is we owe to God, whatever our responsibility is, obviously that is something we want to fulfill.

Well, let's begin where we left off last time with tithes. We started looking at the tithe and this is really a fascinating subject. The more you look at it, the more interesting it is.

I want to begin by looking at the vocabulary real quick. The Hebrew word is maaser, M-A apostrophe A-S-E-R or asar, A-S-A-R. And in Greek, it is the apodekatao, which is the verb form, apodekatao.

And the deka in the middle of that, that's where you get, that's the 10th. Decalogue, 10 commandments, decade, 10 years. So apa of course means from.

And so this is the 10th from, you take a 10th from. And so the Greek literally incorporates the idea of a 10th into the name. And dekatao is similar to asar in that it just takes the prefix off.

So the idea here is that one 10th of a person's goods in some fashion or in some category could be money, could be agricultural produce. It was largely the work of your hands in the ancient near East is dedicated to God or to a deity. It's interesting to discover that tithing was not limited to or originating with the Israelites.

Tithing was a relatively common practice in many ancient near Eastern religions. There was a recognition, probably a memory from the earliest days, from pre-flood days and then down through Noah and his descendants that in the same way that there was such a thing as a clean or an unclean animal, Noah knew which were which as the Ark was filling up and he ensured that there was the appropriate number of clean and unclean animals. Well, this is centuries before the law of Moses is gonna come down from Sinai.

So there was knowledge of how to perform a sacrifice. This is the issue with Cain and Abel. What is the prescription for sacrifice? And we do not have the record of that revelation or its details in those ancient days, but you could imagine that because there was sacrifice in other religions and in some cases, it became corrupted and turned to things such as child sacrifice, human sacrifice, and so on.

But the idea that the deity needed to be propitiated in some way included this idea of not only some sort of sacrifice and offering, which will be our subject in the second session, but a tithe, a prescribed portion. So this idea, of course, was formalized in the law of Moses. And then after the captivity in the post-exilic days that we are looking at, it began to develop a lot of accreted traditions and expansions and specifications under the rabbis.

We don't have very much evidence for tithing in other religions because we don't have very much literature from other religions, but there are some indications in the Ugaritic language that they had some cognate words to the Hebrew and that those people practiced tithing. But because it is sort of taken for granted in the law of Moses, that people understand the tithe

without a great deal of explanation, that it was widely prevalent in those days. In terms of previous to Moses, we have two passages in Genesis where tithing is formally addressed.

These are Genesis 14, 18 through 20. This is Abraham and Melchizedek. And you'll remember that after Abraham achieves a military victory over the kings who raided and took Lot and his people captive, when Abraham achieves the victory, he won't take anything from the king of Sodom, not even a shoestring if you remember, but he meets Melchizedek and shares with him bread and wine and he gave him a 10th of all.

So 14, 18 through 20 of Genesis, Melchizedek, king of Salem, brought out bread and wine. He was the priest of God most high. This is an important detail.

Melchizedek is not just the king of Salem, but he is a priest. So this is particularly interesting when you see how carefully God in the Old Testament carefully separates the function of ruling authority such as the king from the worship authority, i.e. the priest. And you'll remember some episodes that we'll refer to here shortly in that regard.

But interestingly, Melchizedek combines those. He is both a priest and a king, which is unusual and without subsequent echo in the Old Testament. God doesn't want David to be a priest and he doesn't want the sons of Aaron to be kings.

So not until you get to prophetic days and you remember in Zechariah, we saw the vision of Joshua being given a crown. And so just as Melchizedek precedes the nation of Israel, Joshua in Zechariah prophetically is sort of a bookend of that precedent. But in between, priesthood and ruling are kept completely separate.

So then again, you have in Genesis 28, 12 through 22, this is the story of Jacob's ladder. We don't have time to turn there, but when Jacob dreams and sees the angels descending and ascending on this ladder, and God says, I am the Lord God of Abraham, your father, the God of Isaac, the land on which you lie, I will give to you and your descendants. Your descendants will be as the dust of the earth.

You'll spread abroad to the West and East, North and South. In you and in your seed, all the families of the earth shall be blessed. When Jacob receives this promise, behold, I am with you and will keep you wherever you go.

We'll bring you back to this land. I will not leave you until I have done what I have spoken to you. Jacob awoke from his sleep.

Now again, this is Genesis 28. I'm now down to verse 16. He said, surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it.

He was afraid and said, how awesome is this place? This is none other than the house of God. And this is the gate of heaven. Jacob rose early in the morning, took the stone that he had put his head on, or had put at his head, set it up as a pillar, poured oil on it, called the name of the

place Bethel.

It had previously, the city nearby had been called Luz. Jacob made a vow saying, if God will be with me and keep me in this way that I am going and give me bread to eat and clothing to put on so that I come back to my father's house in peace, then the Lord shall be my God. And this stone, which I have set as a pillar shall be God's house.

And of all that you give me, I will surely give a 10th to you. I will surely give a 10th. Those are the two patriarchal references to tithing.

Once you get to Leviticus and Numbers and Deuteronomy, especially Deuteronomy, now we get into the details for the nation of Israel. It is found in Numbers chapter 18, verses 20 through 32. Relatively briefly, the Lord said to Aaron, again, this is Numbers 18, 20 through 32.

The Lord said to Aaron, you shall have no inheritance in the land, nor shall you have any portion among them. I am your portion and your inheritance among the children of Israel. We looked at this last week.

Behold, I have given the children of Levi all the tithes in Israel as an inheritance in return for the work which they perform, the work of the tabernacle of meeting. Now, just so you're watching, to whom are all the tithes in Israel given? These are the sons of Levi. Is that a synonym for the priests? No.

You can be a son of Levi and not be a priest. You can't be a priest without being a son of Levi in the Levitical priesthood, right? So the circle that contains sons of Levi is big. Inside that circle is a smaller circle, sons of Aaron.

They are the priests. So I have given the children of Levi all the tithes of Israel because the Levites as an entire tribe have no inheritance in the land. They don't have a tribal territory.

They are to receive their support from the other tribes, the other 12 tribes. So hereafter, I'm still in Numbers 18 and I'm now at verse 22. Hereafter, the children of Israel shall not come near the tabernacle of meeting lest they bear sin and die.

But the Levites shall perform the work of the tabernacle of meeting and they shall bear their iniquity. It shall be a statute forever throughout your generations that among the children of Israel, they shall have no inheritance. For the tithes of the children of Israel, which they offer up as a heave offering to the Lord, I have given to the Levites as an inheritance.

Therefore, I have said to them, among the children of Israel, they shall have no inheritance." So in a sense, the 12 tribes, you remember there's 13 total because Joseph is a double tribe, Ephraim and Manasseh. So the 12 tribes are going to be doing the work of the fields, herds, flocks, gathering fruit from the trees of the land and so on and bringing tithes. And those tithes are gonna be placed into the hands of the Levites.

Now it's the Levites responsibility. They bear both the fruit of honor and worship to God and they bear the iniquities of the people to God. And by this, the Levitical functionaries, whether they are groundskeepers or pot washers or haulers of ashes or whatever it is they might do, even if they're not priests, they are supporting and accomplishing the work of the tabernacle and later the temple where the sins of the people are going to be covered.

Right? So they bear the iniquities of the people. That's the reason you need a tabernacle. If there was no iniquity, God could just sit on his throne and people could gather into his presence the way we do.

Because of our high priest, we enter into the holiest through the veil, which is his flesh. What a privilege. These people had to have a whole tribe do nothing but make reconciliation and propitiation and atonement possible so that God could dwell in the midst of the people.

So the tithes of the Levites, the Lord spoke to Moses, this is Numbers 18.25 now. The Lord spoke to Moses saying, speak thus to the Levites and say to them, when you take from the children of Israel the tithes, which I have given you from them as your inheritance, then you shall offer up a heave offering of it to the Lord a 10th of the tithe. So the Israelites tithe to the Levites.

The Levites tithe what they get from the Israelites, a 10th of the 10th as a heave offering. And your heave offering shall be reckoned to you as though it were the grain of the threshing floor and as the fullness of the wine press. You tithing what you received from the Israelites is gonna be reckoned to you as though you had done what they did.

Make sense? Then you shall offer a heave offering to the Lord from all your tithes, which you received from the children of Israel, and you shall give the Lord's heave offering from it to Aaron the priest. And after Aaron's death to the sons of Aaron. So Israel tithes to the Levites, the Levites tithe to the priest.

Good so far? Of all your gifts, you shall offer up every heave offering due to the Lord from all the best of them, the consecrated part of them. Therefore you shall say to them, when you've lifted up the best part of it, the rest shall be accounted to the Levites as the produce of the threshing floor and as the produce of the wine press. You may eat it in any place, you and your households, for it is your reward for your work in the tabernacle of meeting.

You shall bear no sin because of it when you have lifted up the best of it, but you shall not profane the holy gifts of the children of Israel, lest you die. What is the charge in Malachi? You have profaned my table. These heave offerings were meals to be brought before the Lord and eaten in his presence.

More about that shortly. So the 10th of the produce of the land, whether it was vegetables, grain, or fruit, a 10th of every herdsman's flock and herd belongs to the Lord. The Levites are to rely on these tithes for their own sustenance.

This is how they eat because they have no land to work of their own. These tithes are to be brought to the Lord, if you, and the next two chapters are Deuteronomy 12 and Deuteronomy 26, that gives details about this. You save a 10th of your goods and then consume them as a part of a holy meal.

They didn't just bring this and dump it all off with the Levites. They came and ate it before the Lord and invited the Levites. You think about this for a moment.

The picture is really interesting. People didn't just take a tithe. You know, there's churches today where somebody will do some calculations, write a check, drop it in the plate, and their tithing is done.

In Israel, when an Israelite brought a tithe, and remember, these are occasional because you're gonna tithe when there is a harvest. When you bring in the grain, there's a 10th. When your flocks pass under the rod, typically once a year, they would count off.

One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, number 10, they take it aside. And they are not allowed to order the flock or switch them around in any way. If you read these passages, it says you can't switch a bad one for a good one or a good one for a bad one so that the 10th one is a bad one you didn't want anyway, and that goes to the Lord.

Whatever order they line up, you count off and every 10th one goes to God. But this is occasional. It's not every month.

It's not every week. It's on the occasion when there is this harvest, so to speak. There's a fruit harvest.

There's a grain harvest. There's a vegetable harvest. There is the lambing or calving in the flock and in the herd.

The kids come with the goats or whatever. And when that process is complete, you add everything up, run them under the rod. Every 10th one goes to God.

And you take them down and bring them to the Levites. And then there is a shared meal from this. These things don't all go into a giant fire.

They go into a giant meal. And so there is this time of harvest and celebration where those who labor in the work of the Lord are acquainted with and eating with these people who have brought their tithe. So if someone had to travel, a great distance, by the way, if you look at Deuteronomy 14, 22 through 29, these are the detailed instructions.

I'll read this to you right quick. You shall truly tithe all the increase of your grain that the field produces year by year, annually, once a year. You shall eat before the Lord, your God, in the place where he chooses to make his name abide, the tithe of your grain and your new wine and your oil.

Catch that? Grain, new wine, oil. This would be your barley, your wheat. New wine, this is gonna be grapes, pressed grapes, the grape juice that hasn't even had a chance to ferment yet.

And your oil, this is gonna be olive oil. Any other oil-bearing crop that you might have. The firstborn, excuse me, the firstborn of your herds and your flocks, the firstborn, that you may learn to fear the Lord, your God, always.

But if the journey is too long for you so that you are not able to carry the tithe, you're way up in Northern Galilee and you gotta go all the way down to Jerusalem with this thing. If the place where the Lord, your God, chooses to put his name is too far from you, notice this is a judgment call on your part. It doesn't say if it's more than a Sabbath day journey, if it's more than so many paces, so many steps.

This is what the scribes and Pharisees did later. God says, look, if it's too far for you, you be the judge. When the Lord, your God, has blessed you, then you shall exchange it for money.

Take the money in your hand and go to the place which the Lord, your God, chooses. You take the thing and cash it out. The cash is a lot easier to carry than a bunch of lambs or big troughs of grain and so on, or buckets of grape juice.

You shall spend the money for whatever your heart desires once you arrive, for oxen or sheep, for wine or similar drink, for whatever your heart desires. It says that twice, whatever your heart desires. This is gonna be an expression of your heart.

You have freedom to choose how you're going to honor God with the tithe of increase that he has blessed you with. You're coming to celebrate in gratitude and thanksgiving, recognizing God as the source of this largesse. Whatever your heart desires, you shall eat it there before the Lord, your God, and you shall rejoice, you and your household.

You shall not forsake the Levite who is within your gates, for he has no part nor inheritance with you. At the end of every third year, you shall bring out the tithe of your produce of that year and store it up within your gates. So one year, you either take it to the place where God's name is, i.e. eventually Jerusalem, or you cash it out, take the cash, buy something, and eat it before the Lord and celebrate in thanksgiving and share with the Levites who are down there.

But every third year, you take it and store it up at your own town, the nearest town that's got gates. So at the end of every third year, bring out the tithe of your produce of that year, store it up within your gates. And the Levite who lives with you, who's not operating down at the tabernacle or the temple, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless, and the widow who are within your gates.

Notice, not only the Levites within your gates, but local charity. I am reading to you Deuteronomy 14, 29. The Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the stranger and the fatherless and the widow who are within your gates, within your gates, nearby, you know them.

You know something about them. May come and eat and be satisfied that the Lord your God may bless you in all the work of your hand, which you do. Once again, that was Deuteronomy 14, 22 through 29.

You save a tenth of your goods, consume them as a part of a holy meal at the center of worship. Every third year, you do it locally. There is provision if you're at a distance in terms of using cash.

Tithing fell by the wayside, especially in the latter days of both Israel and Judah. Right before Israel's destruction in 721, tithing had long ago been replaced by idolatry and all kinds of awful practices. Think Ahab, Jezebel, Athaliah, going down to Judah and so on.

And it died out. There were a few attempts at revival. You think of Asa, you think of Josiah and so on, but even Hezekiah, but it just didn't last.

One of the last mentions of tithing, tithing was reinstated as a part of Hezekiah's worship reforms in 2 Chronicles 31, two through 12. After the exile, the time that we're looking at in Malachi, in Nehemiah 10, 32 through 39, and again in Nehemiah 12, 44 to 45, the people promised to reinstate tithing. That's Nehemiah 10, 32 to 39, and Nehemiah 12, 44 and 45.

But there is a difference and a departure. And as with so many things in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, there is this brave attempt to get back to what they ought to be, but they fumbled the ball. Rather than instructing the people to bring their tithes to the temple and to share with the Levites and eat the meal before God.

When you read this in Nehemiah 10 and 12, the Levites go and collect the tithes. They are now the tax man. The Levites go out and collect the tithes and bring them there themselves.

So now these things become the possession of the Levites. They go get them and haul them back and say, we'll be sure you tithe what you're supposed to. In the same way that, well, we'll be sure you marry who you're supposed to, and we'll be sure you get rid of foreign wives and children.

We're gonna take charge of religious life because you can't be trusted to make good decisions. Sound familiar? We're gonna become the oppressive regime because we know best. And it's another symptom, it's another signal that Israel has a superficial zeal for God, but not according to knowledge from post-captivity days down to the time of Christ and beyond.

A zeal for God, as Paul says, but not according to knowledge. Why do you not go back to the law of Moses? There's a reason God said people should voluntarily bring these and they should come and consume them before the Lord and celebrate. Look at this wonderful food, this is the best.

And I've brought it down here, I'm gonna share it with those who commune with God on a daily basis. I want them to tell my God how grateful I am. I'm going to express by my generosity with

them and my celebration with them, that we are a community linked to the God of heaven.

They kill that when they come back from the captivity. Now, Levites, you're gonna go out with a wagon and a stick, beat on your door, where's your tithe? That's what happens in Nehemiah 10, 32 through 39 and 12, 44 and 45. Thus, the prophet Malachi, as we see, brings the word of the Lord to these priests and Levites who are abusing the tithe.

You are robbing God, not just of the substance, but of the appreciation, the celebration, the original intent. God doesn't need more grain and new wine and fatlings of the flock and the herd. God needs people who will come before his presence with singing, who will enter into his gates with thanksgiving and into his courts with praise, who will recognize not only the formal Levites and priests who function down at the temple, but the Levites who live in their midst, who are scattered throughout the land and recognize that this is what separates Israel from the nations is we have God's representatives in our midst.

We are salted with them. We are seasoned with them. They are scattered throughout.

Why are they there? Why aren't they all down at the tabernacle or temple? Who has the law of God? Who can explain it? Who can teach it? Who can teach Torah as we saw in Malachi chapter two? They are there to remind people just their presence, walking around in their Levitical garments is a reminder. We're unique. We are the people of God.

And so what would we have by way of application looking at the tithe? We should be rushing into the presence of God with sacrifices of praise and thanksgiving when he blesses us to recognize its source, to acknowledge his grace and his generosity, his faithfulness, his manifestly expressed love for us. Sometimes we receive a thing and we wanna call people up on the phone and say, oh, this is just the most wonderful thing that this happy return, this unforeseen boon has come my way. We just wanna remember, and I think many of us do, but it's helpful to remember this example in Malachi.

And the first thing we should do is fall on our knees and say, Lord God in heaven, you are so gracious. You have filled us with bounty. The lines have fallen to us in pleasant places and start enumerating the expressions of grace and the expressions of faithfulness and provision and protection that God has extended to us and to always lead with thanksgiving.

How cranky can you be? How depressed and discouraged and downcast and disheartened can you be if you have a regular practice of going to God and enumerating everything we have that comes from him that is good. You just can't stay down for long, regardless of circumstance. I think this is why Paul and Silas and the others in Acts 16, after they were arrested, beaten, whipped, and put in the stocks in a dark, dank dungeon, the jailer heard them singing, singing songs.

And after the earthquake and the other prisoners escaped, they were still singing. That's how the jailer knew they were still there. They were in there praising God.

Is that our heart? Or are we like these post-exilic Levites and priests who rob God? God's not interested in the tangible, the material, these literal pots of grape juice and grain and animals. God's got the cattle on a thousand hills. What does he want from us? Do we have the heart that says, that's not too great a distance for me.

I can get there. I wanna give God absolutely this thing that came in my herd and flock. Only if I'm just across the river, far, far somewhere that I can't get there, would I cash it out and carry that.

But I want to celebrate this exact thing that God gave me. I wanna bring it into his presence and enjoy it before him and share it with those who appreciate him and who walk with him on a daily basis. That's a privilege.

Well, a little bit more about tithing, and then we're gonna get into offerings when we come back from the break.