

From Blessing to Blessed

So, two guys are standing at the gates of heaven – one a New York cab driver and the other the pastor of a thriving church. The angel at the gate asks the cab driver who he is and what he did for a living. The cab driver says, “I’m Joe Scarletti and I drove a cab in New York.” The angel says, “Welcome, here are the keys to your mansion” and Joe Scarletti walks in with a big smile on his face.

The minister is pretty excited after hearing that and so he steps right up and says, “I’m Pastor Tom and I was the senior minister of Apple Valley Community Church, where I preached the gospel for 47 years!” The angel says, “Welcome pastor, here are the keys to your apartment.”

The pastor says, “Hey, wait a minute. That guy ahead of me was a cab driver and he got a mansion. I was a pastor for 47 years preaching the gospel and I get an apartment?”

The angel says, “Yeah, you see, while you preached, people slept, but when Joe drove, people prayed!”

When it comes to living a life of generosity, how might the view from heaven differ from our view? That’s what we want to study today from God’s Word. And first, we see...

I. The Connection Between the Spiritual and the Material.

Jesus once said,

“It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is no help at all...” (John 6:63)

Because of statements like that, some people think that Jesus was a non-materialist, like the Gnostics. Do you know the Gnostics? Gnosticism was a heresy that plagued the Church for the first several centuries of its existence. Gnostics derived their name from the Greek word for knowledge, which is *gnosis*. They claimed to have a secret spiritual knowledge by which they redefined all of reality.

For example, the Gnostics believed that, since God the Father was spiritual, He must be completely separate from physical matter. In fact, they believed that physical matter was evil. So, whatever happened in the physical world basically had no impact upon the spiritual world. You probably can figure out the practical ramifications of this for regular people. Gnostics taught that what you did with your body then, didn’t really matter because it had no connection with your spirit or soul life. So, to be an ethically good person, you only had to be good in your inner, non-material life: your thoughts, your visions, your spirit.

I think a lot of people today are neo-Gnostics. Someone commits a terrible crime and when the news media interviews their neighbors, they always seem to say, “I can’t believe he did that terrible thing. He’s such a nice person.” People who commit terrible crimes, I think by definition, are NOT nice people.

You see, when Jesus said, “*It is the Spirit who gives life, the flesh is no help at all,*” He was talking about the SOURCE of life, not the manifestation of life. Jesus, speaking about false teachers, said:

“You will recognize them by their fruits. Are grapes gathered from thornbushes, or figs from thistles? So, every healthy tree bears good fruit, but the diseased tree bears bad fruit.” (Matt. 7:16, 17)

In Malachi chapter 3, God makes a strong connection between the spiritual and the material worlds. He says to the people, through the prophet Malachi:

“From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions.” (Mal. 3:7, 8)

First of all, what do we learn about tithes and contributions here? They belong to God. God isn’t asking us to think deeply about whether or not we want to give a tithe of our income to Him. He’s stating His rights. The tithe, one tenth of my income, is not mine. It is God’s. So, if I spend more than 90% of my income, whatever part I spend above 90% is me stealing from God.

I think this makes it pretty clear that God intends for there to be a strong connection between the spiritual world and the material world. How we spend our money is either spiritually good or spiritually bad. Secondly, we need to see that there’s not only a connection but:

II. There Are Consequences Between Spiritual and Material Actions.

Beginning again in verse 9, God continues:

“You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts.” (Mal. 3:9-11)

What we’re seeing in this passage in Malachi is that material actions, our behaviors, have spiritual consequences. If we tithe, we’re blessed; if we don’t we’re cursed. But it can move in the other direction as well. If you take a spiritual action (you pray), there can be a consequence in the material world. Our prayer teams see this every week! God responds to faithful prayer by taking action in the physical world – people are healed, relationships are restored, finances are rescued. And this is simply what God is promising in this passage.

In fact, God dares you to try it! He says, *“...put me to the test... [see] if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.”* v.10

You know, I realize that if you’re new to this whole thing of being a God-follower or if you’re still just investigating whether or not you want to BE a God follower, this might sound pretty severe. “Ten percent of my income? Are you kidding me?” Or you might even hear some Christians say, “You know, nobody talks about tithing in the New Testament. Instead, it just says in II Cor. 9:7, ‘Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.’ So, I’m just supposed to give whatever makes me cheerful.”

Well, not so fast. First of all, that passage in II Corinthians isn’t talking about tithing, it’s talking about giving to a voluntary relief fund to help impoverished Christians in Jerusalem. Secondly, Jesus absolutely DID command tithing when He rebuked the Pharisees in **Matt. 23:23** by saying:

“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.”

So, tithing is clearly taught in the whole Bible. But listen, you’ve got to look at the whole equation that God is laying out here. Yes, He says that if you don’t tithe, you’re robbing Him.

But that's not the end of His message! He continues and says that when we tithe, He will do what?

"...I will... open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you (bugs, locusts, European corn bore!) so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts." (Mal. 3:10b-11)

So, this appears to say that not only will God bless you until your needs are met, but He will bless the work of your hand, protecting it from disease and destruction.

Now, based on passages like this, some today have extrapolated that every tithing and obedient Christian should expect to be fabulously wealthy and free of every form of disease. And if you are not fabulously wealthy or if you as a Christian get sick, then you obviously have some hidden sin. In other words, it's your fault. Is that a proper interpretation of this teaching?

Well, let me make a few observations. First, this passage in Malachi and others like it in the Old Testament are primarily written to the nation of Israel and so the promises of wealth and protection for the means of production are technically corporate promises. The nation will prosper, the nation will be protected.

However, Jesus did make a very clear and straightforward promise to faithful, individual Christians in Luke 18:29, 30 where He said:

... "Truly I say to you, there is no one who has left house or wife or brothers or parents or children, for the sake of the kingdom of God, who will not receive many times more in this time, and in the age to come eternal life."

Please notice what He is promising. He's promising material and spiritual blessing in this present world and full and complete blessing in the world to come for those who are fully committed to serving Him. This is not a promise of fabulous wealth or a disease-free life. It is a promise of great blessing in this life and complete blessing in the next with Him.

Which brings us to verse 12, where we find that...

III. Generous Actions Will Produce New People.

In verse 12, God makes a summary statement describing what a national generosity will produce. He says:

Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts. (Mal. 3:12)

From blessing to blessed. Do you see it? God is saying that if the people will move from blessing God with their tithes to blessing others with their generosity, then not only will He bless them but He will see to it that other nations (all other nations!) will recognize it and call it what it is: you're blessed!

Could this really happen? For this to truly be a universal principle, this would have to be true of even very poor and destitute nations. Have you ever heard of a large impoverished people group who decided to obey the tithe and God fulfilled this promise of Malachi 3? Well, if you haven't, you're about to right now. Please watch this...

[Show A Handful of Rice Begin at :33, end at 7:04]

So many of us believe that our nation is on the wrong path. What will it take to turn our whole nation around? Is it even possible? God says: (Mal. 3:7, 10, 12)

Return to me and I will return to you...Bring the full tithe into the storehouse... Then all the nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight...