

Malachi

by Ross Callaghan

<http://rosscallaghan.yolasite.com>



Malachi is the last of the Minor Prophets, and the final book in the Old Testament.

Author Malachi is normally attributed to a prophet called Malachi, but some think it could have been written by Ezra, or by an un-named “messenger of God”. (Malachi means *My messenger*). There is no information about the author in the book.

Date It is hard to date the book as it contains few historical details. It was probably written after the Jews had come back from Exile in Babylon and had rebuilt the temple under Nehemiah. This would date it after 450BC. The prophets Haggai and Zechariah also wrote their books around this time. As the book deals with abuses in the temple it was probably written in Jerusalem.

Purpose Malachi is an “*oracle, the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi*”. 1:1

It was written to rebuke the Israelites, particularly the priests, for their sin in failing to follow the Lord’s ways. The temple had been rebuilt and many reforms instituted. Over time, though, the people were beginning to stray from the Lord and becoming apathetic. They were questioning God’s love and justice; not respecting God; defiling the altar; being unfaithful to God through divorce and inter-marriage; and refusing to repent of their sin.

Malachi points out how they are disobeying God and warns them of God’s judgement if they don’t repent. God is vindicated while those who do not follow His ways are condemned. The Israelites are consistently reminded that they must keep God’s statutes.

Outline Malachi is structured around six disputes that God has with the Israelites.

The disputes are written like a trial in a court of law and follow a regular pattern:

- Malachi states God’s position on what they were doing
- the Israelites challenge this
- Malachi presents evidence supporting God’s position and says what they must do.

- 1: 1-5** A dispute about God’s love
- 1:6-2:9** A dispute about God’s honour
- 2:10-16** A dispute about faithfulness
- 2:17-3:6** A dispute about God’s justice
- 3:7-12** A dispute about repentance
- 3:13-4:3** A dispute about speaking against God

Appendices

- 4:4** An admonition to remember the law of Moses
- 4:5,6** An announcement of the sending of Elijah

1: 1-5 A dispute about God's love

The Israelites were questioning God's love for them.

Malachi reminded them that in the rivalry between Jacob and Esau God preferred Jacob. (Genesis Chapters 25-28). As descendants of Jacob (Israel), they have been favoured by God as His chosen people, while the descendants of Esau (Edom) have been become desert dwellers. The Edomites will always be under God's wrath and *You will see it with your own eyes and say 'Great is the LORD - even beyond the borders of Israel.* 1:5.

1:6-2:9 A dispute about God's honour

Next the Israelites are accused of failing to show God the respect He deserves.

The Law requires the sacrifices to be *without defect* (Leviticus 1:3), but the priests were using blind, injured, crippled and diseased animals, thus defiling the altar and showing disrespect for God. They must truly repent and ask God to be gracious to them. Otherwise God will not accept their offerings for *My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name; because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty.* 1:11

God has been faithful and kept His side of the covenant. If they will not listen and repent they and their descendants will be cursed. The priests have shown partiality, not been a good example, done things for their own gain, and not taught the people correctly. God wants His covenant with Levi (the priests) to continue because they are *a messenger of the Almighty* 2:7 but they have turned aside from God and violated the covenant. That's why they have been *despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways and have shown partiality in matters of the law.* 2:9

2:10-16 A dispute about faithfulness

The Israelites were not being faithful to God or to one another. This meant they were corrupting the special covenant relationship God had with them. They were desecrating the sanctuary by intermarrying with other nations, flooding the Lord's altar with false tears of repentance about this, and engaging in divorce and violence. As a result God was not accepting their sacrifices or paying attention to their offerings.

They are urged to 'cut off' those guilty of intermarriage and remain faithful to the wives of their youth. God hates divorce, and violence. *So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith.* 2:16

2:17-3:6 A dispute about God's justice

The Israelites had wearied the Lord by questioning God's justice. They said that God wasn't punishing the wicked. In fact *All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord. !!* 2:17

Malachi reminds them that God will send His messenger and then the Lord will come to His temple and purify His people. *Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings will be acceptable to the Lord; as in days gone by; as in the former years.* 3:3,4 God will come in powerful judgement against all sinners.

These verses are clear prophecies of the First and Second comings of the Lord Jesus Christ. They show how John the Baptist will come as the forerunner for the Lord Jesus Christ, and how God will restore Israel at the Second Coming.

But God doesn't change! He will keep His promises to Israel (as He has done in the past) even when she has turned away from Him. *'Return to me and I will return to you' says the Almighty.* 3:7

3:7-12 A dispute about repentance

The people asked *How are we to return?* 3:7

The reply is that they are under a curse because they have been robbing God through their tithes and offerings.

God challenges them to *“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 enough room for it”.* 3:10

These verses are often used (or abused!) to encourage giving in the local Church. See comments below about tithing and Christian giving.

If they will repent and do this, their crops will be fruitful and *all the nations will call you blessed for yours will be a delightful land.* 3:12

3:13-4:3 A dispute about speaking against God

The people have said harsh things against God. They were tired of serving God because it had not brought them prosperity. Others who ignored God were prospering and God was not disciplining them.

God’s response is to remind them that He keeps a scroll of remembrance for those who honour Him. *“They will be mine,” says the Lord “in the day when I make up my treasured possession”.* 3:17 On that day the wicked will be judged and the righteous spared. *For you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.* 4:2

“On that day” refers to ‘the day of the Lord’ which is also spoken of in Zephaniah 1:14 and Joel 2:31. This will take place at the second coming of Christ when all will be judged by the Lord.

The last two verses of Malachi form an appendix:

4:4 An admonition to remember the law of Moses

4:5,6 An announcement of the sending of Elijah

God will send Elijah before the great and terrible day of the Lord comes. *He will turn the hearts of the fathers to their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse.* 4:5,6

This is referred to in Matthew 11:1-19. Jesus explained that John the Baptist had come as the messenger of God to prepare the way for His coming; and that *if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who was to come.* v14 This was part of the powerful advance of the Kingdom of God that Jesus was promoting.

Lessons from the Book of Malachi

1. Teaching about God

- God is referred to as the Lord Almighty (YHWH Sabaoth - The Lord of Hosts). This occurs 18 times and shows God’s great power.
- God’s grace is shown in how He has chosen Israel and in how He is patient in dealing with her sinfulness.
- God’s justice is reinforced and Israel commanded to repent of her sins or she will face judgement.
- God’s love for Israel is highlighted and shows in His desire to have an ongoing relationship with His people.
- God is sovereign in His actions. He is ruler over all (1:2-5); a father (1:6); master (1:6); governor (1:8); king (1:14); and one who gives commandments and sets covenants (2:4, 5, 10; 4:4).

2. Teaching about people

- It’s easy to disrespect God. If we have bad attitudes and doubt God’s love we will soon fall into sin and this will grieve the Lord.
- It’s easy to justify our wrongdoing, and blame others so we don’t face up to our own sin.
- As God’s people we should be living before Him with the highest standards of integrity and righteousness. When we fall short of these standards we need to repent immediately.

3. Links to the New Testament

- Malachi has an interesting parallel in the NT in Titus 2:11-13.
 - appreciate the grace of God v11
 - live godly lives v12
 - look forward to the coming of the Lord. v13
- Malachi is quoted directly or indirectly in a number of places in the New Testament:
 - 1:2,3 *Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.* Romans 9:13
 - 1:7,12 *the Lord's table* 1 Corinthians 10:21
 - 2:10 *one Father* 1 Corinthians 8:6
 - 3:1 *I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.* Matthew 11:10, Mark 1:2, Luke 7:27
 - 3:2 *Who can endure the day of his coming?* Revelation 6:17
 - 3:7 *Return to me and I will return to you.* James 4:8
 - 4:5 *I will send you the prophet Elijah.* Matthew 11:14, 17:12, Mark 9:13
 - 4:6 *He will turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents.* Luke 1:17
- Some prophecies in the book of Malachi were fulfilled when John the Baptist came to prepare the way for the Lord. 3:1; 4:5,6. Others will be fulfilled at the Second Coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. 3:2-4; 4:1-3. (Most Jews continue to await the coming of the prophet Elijah who will prepare the way for the Lord).

Comments about tithing and Christian giving

These days Churches can be big organisations with lots of programmes; paid staff; expensive buildings etc. so a great deal of money is required to ensure they run effectively. Malachi 3:10,11 are often used (out of context) to encourage Christians to tithe 10% of their income to their local Church.

Often this is couched in a way that:

- equates giving to God with giving to the local Church
- fosters guilt or condemnation. *If you don't give 10% of your income (before tax) to us you are robbing God!*
- promises blessings from God. *If you give 10% of your income to us God will bless you wonderfully.*
- requires both a tithe and an offering. *The tithe is what you owe God; the offering is on top of that.*

But is this a valid interpretation of the verses in Malachi and does the New Testament teach the style of giving that is common in many of today's Churches? We shall explore tithing in the Old Testament, and the principles for giving in the New Testament to find a scriptural answer to these questions. A key to finding a valid answer is to read the relevant Bible verses *in context*.

Tithing before the Law

See Genesis 14:18-24, Hebrews Chapters 7 and 8. Abram (later Abraham) went to war and gave a tithe (Hebrew *ma'aser* - a tenth part) of the plunder to Melchizedek, King of Salem, a priest in the temple at what was later called Jerusalem. Abram gave away the rest of the plunder, except what his men had eaten.

This is the first mention of tithing in the Bible. The incident is interpreted in Hebrews Chapters 7 and 8 in a way that focuses on Jesus as a High Priest after the order of Melchizedek, not on tithing. Jesus, who came from the tribe of Judah (not a priestly tribe), is a priest forever on the basis of an indestructible life. There is no requirement on Christians to tithe anything.

Tithing under the Law

In Old Testament times Israel did not have a government as we do now. Israel was a theocracy and most of society's functions were administered by the priests from the Temple. This included gathering produce of the land (crops, wine etc.) so there could be a sharing of wealth and a pool of food and resources for the Temple and for the people. There was a requirement under the Law for everyone to tithe their produce (just as we are required to pay taxes today, except that the tithe was produce rather than money). The Old Testament tithes were gathered and administered by the priests and were requirements under the Law, rather than gifts to God. Giving beyond the requirements of the Law was voluntary and was seen as being to the Lord. Exodus 25:2; 1 Chronicles 29:9. The total giving was probably over 20%. (Compare this to today when we have to pay direct and indirect taxes, local government rates etc. which for many are over 50% of their income, and our Christian giving is on top of this. It is much more costly to run the kind of society we live in today!).

Under the Law three tithes are mentioned:

1. The **first tithe** was to the Levites Numbers 18:21

One tenth of the produce was collected by the Levites and brought to the Temple. This tithe is called the 'sacred portion'.

2. The **second tithe** was a tenth of the first tithe.

The Levites were to give the 'best part' of the first tithe to the priests. Numbers 18:25-29 The second tithe was brought to the storehouse in the treasury. Nehemiah 10: 35-39, Malachi 3:7-12 If the journey to the Temple was going to be long money could be substituted instead of the produce. The storehouse (Hebrew owtzar -store, treasure house) was a warehouse in which the second tithe was stored.

3. The **third tithe (or the Poor Tithe)** was to the poor. Deuteronomy 26:12-15

In the third year the whole of the second tithe was given to the Levites and the poor.

Malachi revealed that the priests were keeping some of the produce for themselves and not bringing the full tenth of the second tithe to the storehouse. As a result they were 'robbing God'. Malachi 3:10

These tithes have no relevance for Christians as we are not under the Old Testament Law.

Under the New Covenant we are *no longer under law but under grace*. Romans 6:14 The Law was a temporary system until the coming of Christ. Romans Chapters 6 - 8 shows Christians have died with Christ and so are dead to the Law, and thus free from all obligations to keep it. Rather than living under the Law we are to live in the Spirit and this will enable us to be really fruitful for God. Jesus has fulfilled the Law so it no longer has any relevance for Christians (including the 10 commandments and tithing laws). Jesus' 'new commandment' is to love the Lord, our neighbours and ourselves, and obey what God says for us to do. See also Romans 13: 8-10; Mark 12:29-31; John 13:34,35; John 14:15-27; Matthew 5:17-20, 22:37-39; Galatians Chapters 2:11- 5:26; Ephesians 2:14-18, Colossians 2:6-23; Hebrews 10:1-18; James 2:8-13; 1 John 3, 2 Corinthians 5:14-21; Colossians 1:15-23; Hebrews 1:10-18; 7:23-10:18; 1 Peter 1:13-25. etc. Also the Church Council in Acts 15 laid no burden on believers to follow the Law.

To require Christians to tithe based on Malachi 3:10,11, almost as a new Christian 'Law', is not a scriptural requirement. Rather it is unjustified, legalistic and often brings Christians into un-necessary bondage.

Christian giving

In the time of Jesus Israel was under Roman rule, and there were well established governmental systems, with many taxes. This removed many of the reasons for the Old Testament tithing systems. The priests, 'teachers of the Law' and the tax collectors were abusing many of the Law's systems and Jesus often castigated them for this. eg. Matthew 17:24-27, Matthew 23.

Under the New Covenant giving is not under law, but is a free and joyful response to God's grace! This is quite different from the common practice in many of today's churches in which a tithe of one's income, plus extra offerings must be given to the local church, and it is then administered by leaders in the church. This is seen as 'giving to God', and not doing it is seen as 'robbing God'!

Here are some of the main New Testament principles about giving:

- Christians must pay all required taxes. Matthew 22:15-22, Romans 13:1-7
- There is no requirement anywhere in the New Testament to tithe anything. There is, however, a consistent focus on giving, as a response to God's grace. Any New Testament references to tithing are consistently related to a condemnation of those who were doing it legalistically. eg. Matthew 23:23, Luke 11:42, Luke 18:12
- Early Christian leaders (like Paul) financed themselves by working and were proud of the fact that they didn't make demands on their followers. Acts 18:3, 1 Thessalonians 2:1-12
- 2 Corinthians Chapters 8 and 9 are key chapters on giving.
 - Giving flows from God's grace towards us. 8:1
 - Giving is generous. 8:2,3, 20
 - Giving is a privilege. 8:4
 - Giving is more about giving of yourself, than of your money. 8:5
 - Giving is not a commandment; it is a free-will response. 8:8
 - Giving follows Jesus' example in which He poured out His life for others. 8:9
 - Giving is 'according to your means'. 8:11
 - Giving may be reciprocal. Give when you have plenty to meet others' needs; they will give when they have plenty to meet your needs. 8:13-15
 - Giving is a way of serving others. It is other-centred; not self-centred. 9:1,2
 - Giving is not done begrudgingly. 9:5
 - Giving is part of the 'sowing and reaping' principle. *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* 9:6, Galatians 6:7-9, Luke 6:38
 - Giving is planned. Everyone should decide what to give, and then give freely and generously. 9:7
 - *God loves a cheerful giver.* This verse rules out any "compulsion", organizational pressure, guilt trips, emotional blackmail, manipulation etc. regarding giving. If churches try to enforce tithing using these practices they are stopping their people from growing spiritually and hindering a genuine partnership with Christ in giving by grace. Giving that is reluctant or coerced does not please God, for God loves a cheerful giver." 9:7
 - God's grace comes to those who give. 9:8-11. (But this does not mean that we give so that we will get. That would make the motive for giving a selfish one, rather than a response to God's grace).
 - Being rich gives more opportunity to be generous in giving. 9:11
 - Giving meets the needs of God's people 9:12, and results in much thanksgiving to God. 9:13-15
- Christians belong to God. Everything that we have and are is His. *You are not your own. You have been bought with a price.* 2 Corinthians 6:9 Our giving is a reflection of this.
- Christians are encouraged to set aside an amount of money on the first day of every week, in keeping with their income, so there is a fund which can be distributed to 'God's people'. No specific amount or proportion of income is required to be given. Rather we are to give in a way that recognises God's grace in blessing us. 1 Corinthians 16:1,2
- Our motive in giving is all important. We should give willingly 2 Corinthians 8:12, cheerfully 2 Corinthians 9:7, generously 2 Corinthians 9:6, and freely Matthew 10:8.
- We can give to needy Christians Romans 12:13, 2 Corinthians 9:12; the sick and aged Acts 20:35; church leaders 1 Timothy 5:17; those who teach God's Word Galatians 6:6-10; widows Acts 6:1, 1 Timothy 5:16; the poor 1 Timothy 5:8-16, and missionaries 3 John 5-7.

The practice of tithing (of money, rather than produce) entered the Church about 500 years after Christ, and was focused on financing the Church organisation: *"As the Church expanded and various institutions arose, it became necessary to make laws which would insure the proper and permanent support of the clergy. The payment of tithes was adopted from the Old Law... The earliest positive legislation on the subject seems to be contained in the letter of the bishops assembled at Tours in 567 and the [canons] of the Council of Macon in 585."* -The Catholic Encyclopedia. This enshrined the tithe into ecclesiastical Law, and in some countries into national Law. The practice still occurs in some places although, these days, it is often more focused on paying rentals for land.

So giving under the New Covenant is nothing like the Old Testament legal system. We now live not under Law, but under grace. To require Christians to give certain amounts or in certain ways is to revert to a legalism, that we have been set free from, in Christ. 1 Peter 2:16, John 8:36. If you want to give 10% of your income to your local church you are free to do so, but there is no scriptural requirement for this.

The fact that God has poured His amazing grace upon us is our motive to give of ourselves and our possessions. Because He has done so much for us we will give cheerfully, freely and generously.

Thanks be to God for His indescribable gift. 2 Corinthians 9:15

For more information on tithing and Christian giving see:

- The International Standard Bible Encyclopedia
<http://www.searchgodsword.org/enc/isb/view.cgi?number=T8810>
- <http://www.tithingdebate.com/> is a forum for debate about tithing. It includes an authoritative and well researched study on tithing and Christian giving. <http://www.cultwatch.com/tithing.html>
- <http://bible-truths.com/tithing.html> Ray Smith looks at each verse in the Bible on tithing and giving. This is a rather emotive approach, but makes a compelling argument!
- <http://www.spiritualabuse.org/issues/tithing.html> gives a range of resources on tithing.

Discussion questions

Malachi is structured around a number of disputes that God had with the Israelites. What were the issues that God was disputing with them? What were the Israelite's responses? What did God say they had to do?

Relate these disputes to today. Are they relevant for your community? Your Church? Christians? Yourself?

How do prophecies in Malachi relate to the First and Second Comings of the Lord Jesus Christ?

The verses in Malachi 3:8-12 are by far the most widely known and used (or abused!) verses in Malachi? Why are these verses singled out so much and the messages in the rest of the Book hardly ever mentioned? Why do so many Christians respond to these verses when they are applied in a way that is almost blackmail?

What is the context for the verses in Malachi 3:8-12? Comment on the context within the Book, and the historical and cultural context. Is it a valid use of these verses to require Christians today to tithe 10% of their income before tax to their local Church?

What are the New Testament principles that should guide our Christian giving?

What have you learned from your study of Malachi, and of tithing and Christian giving? How will this affect your life in the future?