

False Teaching of Malachi 3:10

From pulpits throughout the land, ministers of God's Word call forth from believers their "tithes" by preaching mini-sermons on Malachi 3:10. In this verse, Malachi prophesies from God that if the people of God would bring forth their tithes [10% of their bounty, or income], then God would bless them with even greater abundance, but if not then God would curse them.

Like with the rest of the Old Testament and much of the New, to understand this passage you have to understand the Mosaic Law, for what God and Malachi are saying here is straight out of that Mosaic Law. While tithes were known before the time of Moses [Genesis 14:20; 28:22], it was in the Mosaic Law that God made such tithes mandatory for all the people of Israel. They were to give back 10% of their crops and animals to God [Leviticus 27:30-32], which represented their income and could be given in the form of money if necessary [Deuteronomy 14:24-25]. God used this money to support the Levites, who worked for God's glory instead of for worldly prosperity [Numbers 18:21-26] and also to help support widows, orphans, and foreigners who had no means of supporting themselves [Deuteronomy 14:28-29]. Nehemiah had reestablished the tithing system in post-exilic Judah just before Malachi's day [Nehemiah 10:37-39].

The promise of blessing or curse is inherent for the whole Mosaic Law [Deuteronomy 11:26-28; 30:11-20]. If the people of Israel obeyed the Law then God would bless them greatly; if they chose not to show God such devotion and dependence, then God would provide a curse [the opposite of blessing], to bring them back into line. Interestingly, when Moses was giving instruction under the Law, he also prophesied the future apostasy of the Israelites, the exile and curses God would bring them, and then the blessing and return that God would effect someday, a day when God would completely re-gather the scattered exiled people to the promised land of Israel, and they would fully obey and receive the full blessings [Deuteronomy 29:1-30:10]. The prophets spoke more about this time, and there were great expectations for this full restoration with God in the post-exilic community.

Unfortunately, the returning Israelites did not achieve this restoration. Malachi is an indictment against the post-exilic community. He was writing to convict them, for their actions and attitudes were proof that the reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah had failed, their actions and attitudes were proof that they were no different than their fathers who were exiled for grievous sin, and their actions and attitudes were proof that – despite their presence in and around Jerusalem – they were not the promised generation who would be fully restored with God. In this indictment, the few lines about tithing were just one of many evidences God brought against the people.

This context is tremendously important to understand, because it provides the setting for Jesus' arrival. Jesus came, not to a politically independent people ready to receive him as promised Messiah and King, but to a people still hardened in rebellion, who had adopted many of the ways of their Gentile rulers, and were spiritually led by a religious establishment that had continued to corrupt the understanding of God's Law in the

centuries since Malachi had written. Understanding this helps the reader of the Gospels to understand the culture and discussions encountered in the Gospels, and also to understand that Israel did not realize the promises God had made to them. Thus, we can see that the church era which began in the New Testament is for Israel a continued time of waiting to realize those promises, which someday they will since God's Word is true.

Even though Israel did not receive the promised reconciliation with God during Malachi's day or while Jesus was here, Jesus said he was ushering in the New Covenant. This New Covenant was prophesied to replace the Mosaic Covenant. This was a covenant for Israel also, but just like the Mosaic Covenant it included provisions for Gentiles who came to worship the one true God. We are enjoying some of those provisions now, even though as a nation Israel is not. This New Covenant has its own set of commands and promises, and it is with these that our relationship with God depends, not with those of the Mosaic Covenant. We are not under the Mosaic Law today, and neither can we count on its promises as individuals, for those promises were made to the nation of Israel which lived under that covenant, not to individuals or the New Covenant church. In our New Covenant, as described in the New Testament, there are commands about giving and some promises [perhaps] associated with them. I am not arguing about that herein, only about the validity of applying Malachi 3.10 to us today, either to command tithes of people or to count on the promise of greater wealth as a result. We have greater promises and blessings than they ever had under the Mosaic Covenant, and we should not be too sad at losing some of the lesser, temporal, ones they had.

This is an important issue. If we teach scripture out of context, we teach the wrong meaning. If we teach the wrong meaning, we not only mislead people about the truth, we also fail to teach them what is true and relevant about a given passage. I would say we can see from Malachi that God expects 100% devotion and dependence, and when we offer less, he is not happy. But we could see that elsewhere throughout the Bible. The more important lesson from Malachi is the historical context for Jesus' arrival and evidence that the promises of full reconciliation for Israel have not yet occurred. I wish more pastors would teach this, so people could understand the Bible's integrated history and see in it the plan of God that runs consistently throughout the Bible. That would not only edify, it would encourage people to value scripture more.