

23 October 2016

On Being and Having
Malachi 3:8-12; Luke 12:13-21

Probably the last of the Old Testament prophets was Malachi, preaching during the Persian period, during a time when Temple attendance was slipping, budgets were tight, and those young people just weren't as moral as their parents were in the good old days. Here's a part of Malachi's response to this situation, Malachi 3:8-12:

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me! But you say, 'How are we robbing you?' In your tithes and offerings! ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! ¹⁰Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing. ¹¹I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts. ¹²Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.

Jesus also talked about money. In fact he talked more about money than about nearly anything else. But oddly enough, he never sounded like Malachi. We read today Luke 12, verses 13-21:

Someone in the crowd said to [Jesus], 'Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.' ¹⁴But he said to him, 'Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?' ¹⁵And he said to them, 'Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.' ¹⁶Then he told them a parable: 'The land of a rich man produced abundantly. ¹⁷And he thought to himself, "What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?" ¹⁸Then he said, "I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. ¹⁹And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry." ²⁰But God said to him, "You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?" ²¹So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich towards God.'

The Malachi reading you just heard was probably familiar to those of you who grew up in church. In my church childhood, it was *the* go-to text for a sermon on financial stewardship. And why wouldn't it be? It's the clearest call for tithing in all of scripture, and it appeals to the most basic, most universal motivation: self-interest. Simply put, Malachi suggests that if you tithe to the temple, then God will give you prosperity. Even better, from the perspective of the church budget, it says to bring the "*full* tithe" into the storehouse. None of this, "give what you can" business. Only at 10% does the benefit kick in. So wait! Does that mean to tithe your gross income or your after-tax take-home pay? Well, it doesn't specify, does it? But why take a chance? If you really want to be rich, you should probably tithe the larger amount, don't you think? That was sort of the gist of the tithing sermons of my childhood: that there was a financial incentive to give to the church.

A few months ago, my mother told me a story. She'd been to a reunion and ran into a guy she had dated once in college. He was now a millionaire, but when she'd known him he'd been in serious financial straits. Evidently, on that date with my mother, she had told him that maybe his financial problems were because he wasn't tithing – pure Malachi – and so he had started. At that reunion, he told her that he owed his financial success to that. Now, I do have some questions about this story. Like, “Mom, Dad's always tithed; what happened to him?” And, “Did you marry the wrong tither?” And most puzzling of all, “Seriously, Mom? A guy took you out on a date and you talked about tithing?” So many unanswered questions here. But the point is, my mother's advice is biblical if you take Malachi on its own.

But, as you've already sensed, there are some deeper problems with Malachi's point of view. Is God really up there calculating income and percentages and doling out rewards accordingly? That's what Malachi sounds like, but that doesn't sound like God in the rest of the Bible. Where is grace? Second, Malachi seems to reduce both our service to God and God's blessing to us entirely to material terms, which feels really superficial and, again, not like God. Throughout the Bible, we read that God is primarily concerned with our hearts and motivations, but not in Malachi. There it's about the bottom line. Most of all, this passage makes our relationship to God transactional, rather than relational. It's not about love; it's about I scratch God's back, and God scratches mine. Malachi turns obedience to God into a calculated investment. This is simply wrong. This is the theology of the Prosperity Gospel, as preached by Joel Osteen, T.D. Jakes, Creflo Dollar, and their ilk – promising wealth to those who give money to the church and then demonstrating that this will work by living lives of luxury themselves. No, Malachi – and I believe I left the Southern Baptist Convention for this moment, when I can say this – Malachi is simply inadequate. Taken by itself, it is wrong.

So let's look at the rest of scripture: What does Jesus say about money? First of all, the only time he ever mentions tithing is in a harsh criticism of people who meticulously tithe but ignore things like justice and mercy – things he calls the “weightier matters of the law.” See, that's the perspective I was talking about, that God actually cares first about what's in your heart, not about what's in your wallet. When Jesus talks about giving, he talks about giving from the depth of your being. He praises people who give sacrificially – like the poor widow – and occasionally commands people to give everything, as he does to the rich young ruler. So Jesus is both less legalistic *and* more demanding. The passage we read earlier, the Parable of the Rich Fool illustrates that. Jesus begins by saying, “Life doesn't consist of the abundance of possessions,” and then he illustrates by telling the story of a man who became prosperous. He had a great year, a bumper crop, gathering more grain than he could pack into his barns. Now Jesus clearly has no problem with that. But when faced with his surplus, given all the options for what to do with it, the rich man decided he'd just build bigger barns and keep it all for himself so that he could relax and enjoy a life of luxury. That's the problem. Why? Because the night after deciding to join the idle rich, the man died. Suddenly, it no longer mattered how rich he was or how big his barns were. The rich man's error was in thinking that somehow being rich was enough, that becoming wealthy was an adequate goal – that was the mistake that defined him forever as the Rich *Fool*.

What I've done so far is set up two very different biblical approaches to material possessions. The one, from Malachi, places our religious life almost entirely in the realm of

material possessions. The second, from Jesus, stresses that material possessions are superficial and that life is more than that. Now, a basic rule in cases like this is: go with what Jesus said. Where there is a conflict between anything else in scripture and the teachings of Christ, Christ gets priority. But that doesn't give us permission to just toss out Malachi's materialistic perspective. It's scripture, too, and somehow we need to deal with it.

So let me back up a little bit to deal with the material world at a more basic level, the level at which we all encounter matter most directly: our own material bodies. When you think about it, we are in a peculiar position. On the one hand it is valid to say that we *have* bodies, at least in the sense that we can choose what we do with them. We can choose to feed them or not, exercise them or not, care for them or not. We – that is, some part of us that is separate from the body – can dispose of our bodies as we choose. And yet at the same time, we are *not* separate from the body. If we dispose of the body entirely, we dispose of ourselves. Our physical being is an essential part of our being. So each of us both *has* a body and *is* a body.

Stay with me here, because this is an important distinction. The bodies that we have are all obviously different from each other – different colors, sizes, shapes, genders, and so on. But none of those distinctions affect our Being. A short person has a smaller body than another person does, but that does not make the short person in any sense a lesser being. Why does this distinction matter? Because we keep forgetting it. We are valuable to God because of the beings that we are, which includes bodies, but we keep trying to assess our worth in terms of the superficial differences between the bodies we *have*, and that leads to all sorts of evil. It leads to racism – assessing value based on skin pigmentation. It leads to sexism – locating relative worth in the presence or absence of certain reproductive organs. It leads to discrimination against people with disabilities, to unrealistic body images, to eating disorders, to fat-shaming, and the like. When we act as if what matters is the bodies that we *have* instead of the bodies that we *are*, we base our value on shaky ground.

Not surprisingly, we often go on to extend that confusion regarding the material bodies that we have to the material things we have. Just as we take our own sense of personhood from our distinct bodies, we also try to draw meaning and value from the external things that we own. We assume that more having equals more being. This is why we tend to honor people based on how much they possess (net worth, size of home, make of car, and so on) and tend to dismiss people who own less. We even make automatic moral judgments based on possessions: this person is rich, and thus must be a hard-working virtuous role model, and that person is poor and therefore probably shiftless, lazy, and dishonest. Despite all evidence to the contrary – every example of a hardworking, admirable waitress and every example of an immoral billionaire – we still automatically make these assumptions, and we will continue to do so as long as we confuse *having* with *being*. In fact, in the eyes of God who created us all from the same dust, Warren Buffett and Bill Gates are just as insignificant – and just as valuable – as the Syrian refugee who has lost everything. But as long as we fail to distinguish having from being, we miss that.

This, I think, is what Jesus is talking about when he says, “life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” The foolishness of the Rich Fool was to forget that, and when we base our being, our personhood, on our material possessions we too are fools. And it won't work. Those who seek their worth in anything so temporary as physical appearance or stock portfolio,

anything so superficial as sex appeal or number of vacation homes, we are pathetic. We we are material beings, and we have material possessions, but our being, our worth, and our personhood are separate from all that.

For the next few weeks we'll be talking about that, about how to put into perspective what we have, making our possessions not a measure of our value but an expression of our faith. Malachi was trying to get there, but he missed. We can honor his attempt, but we can do better, and next week we'll explore how. For now, though, remember this: whatever you have, and however much you have, you are loved by God. And God longs for something from us as well. God's desire is not a calculated percentage of what we have; rather it is a willing sharing of who we are. The way we do that is to give God our love, our loyalty, and our trust. Let's start there.