Generous God
Malachi 3:6-12

Today we're starting a four-week series on The Generous Life, and I want to explain why. Many of you know that, as a church, we face some financial challenges. And in discussions around that I've been challenged as to why I seem reluctant to talk directly about the issue of giving. More than one person has said to me in the last few months, 'we've been here for however long, and you never seem to talk about tithing, why is that? No wonder the finances are a challenge!' Well, there are a number of reasons why. Firstly, there's a gospel reason. I think that as the gospel changes the way we see all of life, it will inevitably change how we see money, and I've been happy to play the long game on that. Secondly, there's a missional reason. One recurring reason people give for being put off by church is that they get the impression that the church is just after your money, and I don't want to feed into that stereotype. And thirdly, there's a cultural reason. Because I'm British and the British don't really like talking about money, at least not if you're old fashioned, like me!

But in all the conversations I've had about this recently, I've been persuaded that it's appropriate, maybe even necessary, to occasionally hit this issue of money for the sake of our discipleship.

But we're going to do that by talking about *generosity* rather than *money*, or even just *giving*. Because generosity is way more than what you do with your money isn't it? I mean think of what it means to describe someone as 'a really generous person'. It says something more than how often they get their cash out, doesn't it? Generosity is a heart thing, it's a whole life thing. It's about how you see others, how you speak of others, how you act towards others, with your life and with your stuff. But it's also about how you see God.

Which is why we're going to start by looking at the Generous God.

Malachi 3:6-12

Now the context of this passage is that the people of Israel have been allowed to return from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem. And you might have expected that return from exile to result in some kind of religious renaissance, but it didn't. Instead, the hard reality of life took it's toll, and the people sank into a kind of dead orthodoxy: they said they believed all the right things, but there was no real *life* to their faith, there was no living *love* for God.

And in the earlier passages of his book Malachi brings home to the people just how broken their relationship with the Lord was. And then you get to this passage in chapter 3, and he tells them that one further way that relationship break down was showing itself was in their failure to give their tithe, a tenth of their produce, to the Lord.

So I've got three points: God's Character, God's Call and God's challenge.

God's character
Look at v6: 'For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.'

Imagine a young couple getting married. What are some of the dangers they face? One is that they have fallen in love with, and then marry, a romantic, idealistic image of the person they *want* their partner to be, instead of the *real* version. And when after a few weeks of marriage they realise that they married the real version and not the image, trouble begins. Because for any relationship, to thrive, you've got to know the person as they *really* are, don't you?

And it's no different with God. If you think wrong thoughts about God, you're relationship with him will suffer. And that seems to be happening here. Judging from v11, life is hard. The Lord talks about how he will 'rebuke the devourer… so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear.' And the implication is that their harvest *has* failed, and the vines have *not* born fruit, that their livelihood *is* being devoured. And when external circumstances go badly, it can do something to you internally, can't it? It can make you think that God is against you, that he is withholding from you, that he is mean and grudging. That, given that he has the power to change these circumstances, if he's not changing them, then clearly he can't love you.

And it's into that situation that the Lord says, v6, 'I the LORD do not change.' And when you see that word, the LORD, with small capitals, it's the translation of God's personal, relational, covenant name, YHWH, the name God revealed to Moses when he first delivered the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt.

And so the Lord is saying, regardless of your circumstances, there is nothing about my character that has changed. I am just as holy, I am just as powerful, I am just as full of love, and I am just as faithful as I have ever been. But in the context of Malachi he's also saying something else. Because look at what follows: v6, again, 'For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.' And they could have been consumed couldn't they? God could have let their enemy, Babylon totally triumph over them and totally destroy them, because, v7, 'From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them.' But he didn't.

And knowing that tells you another way in which God has not changed: his grace to them, his overflowing generosity to them, his willingness to treat them way better than they deserve to be treated, has not changed either. Neither their sin, nor any sin you and I might fall into, can change God's nature, or his willingness to extend grace to those who don't deserve it. And neither their circumstances, nor anything else you and I might go through in life, can change God's character and how generous he is. The mere fact that they still exist, that they're alive, should tell them: God has not changed. Even though we don't deserve it, he is still gracious, he is still generous.

You see, the very reason God had chosen Abraham in the first place was to bless him, and through him to bless others. Look at Genesis 12:1-2, "Now the Lord said to Abram, "Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. And I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you and make your name great, so that you will be a blessing.' In other words, God's original intent was that Abram and his family would be on the receiving end of God's generosity, and that through them, that generosity would overflow into the lives of others. And so through Malachi God is saying, none of that has changed, because I

haven't changed, I still desire that my people experience my blessing, and that through them the world is blessed.

But if God is telling them he has not changed in his desire to be generous the same could not be said of them, could it? Did you see how he describes the people? Verse 6, 'children of Jacob.' Now, have you heard that expression, like father like son? Or in my case, like father like daughter. And you watch your little man, or little girl, taking after you, and you think, o dear! And that was their danger. Because one level, calling them the children of Jacob was simply a reference to them being descended from Jacob the patriarch. But there's another level, isn't there? Because *Jacob* means *cheat*, or *deceiver*. And whilst God their heavenly Father was unchanging in his generosity and desire to bless, they were following in the footsteps of their earthly father Jacob, who was more interested in getting.

And if we're honest, they're not the only ones who can fall short on generosity, are they? Like them we can become pre-occupied with holding on, or getting more. And what once seemed enough, is no longer enough, and we need the next thing, and then the next thing, as stuff gets a hold of our hearts. And because that was what was going in Malachi's day he issues them a call.

God's Call

Verse 7: 'Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.' He calls them to return to him, the God of grace, the God who is generous.

But look how they respond: Malachi says, v7, 'But you say, 'How shall we return?' You see, as far as they were concerned there was no problem, at least not on *their* side: 'I thought we'd already returned from exile, so how can we return, when we haven't gone away?'

But the Lord is talking about their hearts, isn't he. He's calling them to change where their heart goes. He's calling them to return to him, the One whose character will shape and mould their character.

And look what he homes in on. Verse 8, 'Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, 'How have we robbed you?' In your tithes and contributions.' You see what we do with our money and our resources says a whole lot about what we really value in life, doesn't it? We can say we value this or that; we can say that missions, or God's kingdom, or the teaching of God's word, or care for the poor and needy, is really important to us. But so often it's how we use our money that tells the real story. As Jesus said in Matthew 6:21:'where your treasure is, there your heart will be also'. And so in Malachi the Lord exposes the state of their hearts, and the state of their relationship with him, by addressing the issue of their bank accounts.

And look how he puts it. He says they're robbing him. Now why is a failure to give ten percent of their animals and produce to the Lord, because that's what the tithe was, robbing God? Because everything they, and you and I, have belongs to him, doesn't it? Israel, and you and I today, are simply stewards of the good things God pours into our lives. But as he does that, we face a danger. We can begin to think that it's all ours, 100% of it. And the land and its produce then, and our wealth and possessions today can have this strangely seductive power. And we can convince ourselves that far from this being God's gift to us, we've earned it, this is mine, to do

with as I like. But we are only ever God-appointed stewards. And it's all his and he gives it to us for a period to use. And so God calls this failure to mirror his generosity, *robbery*.

You see, think how that tithe was supposed to be used. Every year they were supposed to bring it to Jerusalem, and eat some of it as a fellowship meal at the temple. Then they were to give the rest to the Levites, who had no land of their own, but were responsible for teaching the people God's law and serving in the temple. And then the Levites were to take a tenth of what they received and give that to the priests.

But every third year, rather than going to Jerusalem with their tithe, they were to stay at home and use it to feed the poor: the widows, the fatherless, the foreigner. So giving the tithe was an intensely practical way of saying, this is what matters to me – to love God and to love my neighbour. And as they failed to tithe, it was the teaching of God's word that suffered, and it was the poor who went hungry. *And* it was what *really* mattered to the people that was exposed. Their lack of generosity said that what really mattered to them was not God's word or their neighbour, it was their own personal comfort.

And so the Lord calls them to return to him. Because, ultimately, it wasn't tithing they had turned their backs on, it was God. And as he calls them to return to him, he calls them to once again reflect his generosity: v10, 'Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse'… i.e no more holding back… 'that there might be food in my house' – so the Levites, and the ministry of God's word, can be provided for, and that the poor can be cared for.

But for you and me, the question is, does the tithe still apply? Are you and I called to give 10% back to the Lord. And the answer is: yes and no.

It's 'no' because as we've seen as we've gone through Leviticus, Christ has made the Old Testament law obsolete. And when the New Testament writers talk about giving, they never give a percentage. So no, you are not *required* to give 10%. But in the New Testament it's clear that God *still* owns everything, and you and I are *still* stewards, and we are *still* called to financially support the teaching of God's word and care for the poor.

And just think about it, wouldn't it be really strange if we gave *less* than 10%? If we who have experienced even *more* of God's generosity than they did, were to be even *less* generous than they were? I mean, you and I live this side of Jesus, we have experienced God's grace and generosity and giving to us in the giving of his Son for us in far deeper ways than they ever did. So wouldn't it be strange if we were to say, 'yes I know all that, I know how generous God has been to me, I know he gave the ultimate gift to me in Christ, I know that, so I'm going to give *less*.' Wouldn't that be bizarre?

But of course, unlike for them, for you and me, this is not about obeying a law. It's about joy. It's about knowing deep in your heart God's overflowing generosity to you in Jesus, and having that fill your heart with joy, and allowing that to shape your character so that it reflects ever more of his generous character.

But it was only in returning to God first that these guys in Malachi's day could experience that.

You see, ultimately, their behaviour was self-destructive. All the time they held on, they just made themselves all the poorer. Proverbs 11:24 says, 'One gives freely, yet grows all the richer; another withholds what he should give, and only suffers want.' And that was exactly what was happening here. In v9 the Lord says 'you are cursed with a curse' – that's why their crops and vines were failing. Because all the time they failed to keep the covenant obligation to tithe they brought down on themselves the curses of the covenant which included crop failure. So this was God's wake-up call to them, to show them just how far from their generous king they had drifted, and how far from the generous life they had turned. And nothing changes does it. As Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 9:6, 'whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly.'

So having reminded them of his character, having called them back to him and back to generosity, the Lord issues them a challenge.

God's Challenge
Verse 10, '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.'

So God challenges them to challenge him, to test him. To let him prove to them how much more generous he can be. And how can they do that? How can they position themselves to experience more of God's generosity? By being generous themselves. And if they would cultivate generosity in their own lives, God says they will find themselves standing under a waterfall of divine generosity.

Now you might hear that and think, 'but isn't it wrong to test the Lord? Weren't their forefathers condemned for testing God?' Well sure it's wrong to test the Lord through cynical unbelief, or through complaining, or through rebellion. But to test God's promises through obedience, that is very different. So God challenges them, 'come on, let me prove to you that my character has not changed, that I am still *the* generous God. Do as I do, live as I live, be generous as I am generous, and expereince just how much more generous I can be.'

And how will he do that? Verse 10 again, 'I will… open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing.' Now, on one level the Lord may simply be promising rain for the harvest, and if he is, then the British know all about those particular windows of heaven. But the same expression was used in the time of the prophet Elisha (2 Kings 7:2) to describe abundant, and miraculous divine provision.

But which ever it is, whether it's needed rain, or God providing for them in other ways, the challenge is clear: test me, let me prove to you that you cannot out-give me.

But it's worth pointing out here that this isn't about God meeting their greed, is it? God says in v10 that he will 'pour down for you a blessing until there is no more *need*.' Not greed, need, and sometimes we can mistake the two, can't we? But it's as

they fall into step with this generous God that they will find all their needs being met in him.

And then God promises that as they rediscover generosity he will turn back the curse. Verse 11, 'I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil.' Now I suspect that like many of us, they felt like they never had enough. They knew they should give, but where was that going to come from when there seemed so little to go around? And life can be like that can't it? When money begins to have a grip on you it seems there's never enough. But the Lord says, 'return to me, rediscover what it is to be generous, and then stand back and see how I will provide for you.'

But before you think this was all about them enjoying their own little blessing party, look at v12, 'Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight says the Lord of hosts.' You see, as we saw earlier, the reason God chose Abraham in the first place was that from him God's blessing might flow out to the nations. And here God promises that as the people turn back to him and to generosity the impact of that will be felt in far wider circles than their own bank balance. They will once again become a light and a blessing to the nations.

But as we close, the remarkable truth is that God's character still hasn't changed has it? He is still the generous God, and his call to turn back to him and rediscover generosity is still there, and his challenge still stands. Listen to Paul in 2 Corinthians 9, and listen for the echoes of Malachi 3: 'Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that having all sufficiency in all things at all times, you may abound in every good work… he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way *to be generous in every way*.'

So just like them, you and I can experience even more of God's generosity, by being generous as he is generous. And as we do that, Paul says, we will reap a harvest of righteousness, as we grow in our love and knowledge and understanding of this generous, gracious God. And as his grace to us in Jesus works generosity in our hearts, there is that same promise that he will pour more blessing into our lives so that we have more to give away, whether that is financial resources or spiritual resources of love and encouragement and grace.

You see, why has God so blessed many of us financially? It is not so we can live the high life, is it? It's so we can be his stewards and mirror his generosity in the world, and give to the work of teaching God's word and caring for the poor and needy; so you can enjoy replicating in your own character God's generous character. And as you do that, you'll find ever more of his generosity heading your way, in every way, for some financial, for some non-financial, but for all of us, discovering no one can 'out-generous' God.

It is to that exciting life, of experiencing his generosity in ever deeper ways, that he calls and challenges all of us to step into. I pray we will.