

SERMON November 25, 2018 Putting God to the Test  
TEXT: Malachi 3:1-10  
SUBJECT: Trusting God with our finances  
THEME: God tells us to test Him – to trust Him with all we have  
PURPOSE: To focus on how we reflect God.

How do you prepare for Advent?

It's hard to believe that next Sunday marks the first week in our countdown towards Christmas. We'll have the Holiday Arts Festival, and decorating the church, and then holiday parties and caroling and three services on Christmas Eve!

So how do we prepare for it?

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Earlier this week I went online to see what the holiday TV listings were for December. I counted over 100 of what they called "Christmas Specials" –



[https://www.dailynews.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/20141125 CCT-RUDOLPH-11281-1-1.jpg?w=525](https://www.dailynews.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/20141125_CCT-RUDOLPH-11281-1-1.jpg?w=525)

But out of those over 100 shows, with the exception of some musical numbers that were occasional religious songs, only 2 of those shows mentioned Jesus! "Rudolph" didn't mention Him, nor did "Frosty the Snowman" or even "A Very Brady Christmas"! The only two that DID mention Jesus "A Charlie Brown Christmas", where Linus quotes Luke chapter 2 about the birth of Jesus, and the Claymation special "Nestor, the Long-eared Christmas Donkey"!



<https://data.christianpost.com/full/90853/img.jpg>

For all of the others, Jesus wasn't mentioned very much. Most of the specials seemed to focus on getting together with family or finding your lost love. And those things are nice – but they're not Christmas!

Christmas is about “**God loved the world so much the He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life**”! It's no accident that John puts those words at the BEGINNING of His Gospel, and doesn't wait until the end! Jesus' presence here wasn't just about His death; it was also include His life! All of Jesus' life, including His birth, was His gift to us!

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Throughout history God has been reaching out to us, to offer us hope and healing and to draw us to Himself. Our scripture today comes from Malachi, the very last book of our Old Testament and the last prophet we have recorded before John the Baptist, 400 years later.

Malachi lived in the 5<sup>th</sup> century before Jesus, at a time when the Jews had been taken into captivity by the Persians and Jerusalem had fallen into disrepair. Through the leadership of Nehemiah and Ezra the Jews were allowed to return and to rebuild the temple and the city, but just putting up new buildings did not suddenly heal the peoples' faith. That's important to remember in any building project, that unless passion for the Lord is central to the building project, it just becomes a façade and does not build true faith. Having one's heart focused on God first is what will make it successful.

So Malachi saw that the buildings were being finished and the people were returning, but that there was still something missing. They may have called themselves Jews and they may have been coming to the Temple and offering their gifts and their prayers, but they really didn't believe in it. They were giving lip service to God, saying all of the right things, but they were only doing it out of duty, not love.

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Break for a minute – does any of this happen today? Do you know of stores or people who go all-out in decorating with huge Christmas trees and lights and tinsel everywhere, but it still seems empty?

It is easy to get caught up in the wrong things. The songs and the lights and the food is nice, but that's not what Christmas is about! **Instead of putting ou more lights and more nativity displays, what would happen if we focused on being the light and displaying God's grace to broken and lost people today?**

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If we want for people to take Christmas seriously, we need to show them His reflection. Unfortunately, we often take a militaristic attitude instead of a servant's attitude, like Christ had. For instance, I was out with somebody shopping once during the holiday season, and as we approached the door of the store an attendant there said, “Happy Holidays!”

And the person who was with me turned to them and said, in a very nasty voice, “It’s ‘Merry CHRIST-mas!!!”

What message did we send about Christ in that exchange?

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I don’t have a problem when someone wishes me “Season’s Greetings” or “Happy Holidays!” We are not going to win the world to Christ by being obnoxious or mean. Actually, “Happy Holidays” IS a religious term! It comes from the root “Holy Days” – a day which is holy! So saying “Happy Holidays” is just as religious as “Merry Christmas”!

We are not going to convince the world that Jesus loves them by yelling at them! Instead, what if we offered this?



[https://datingjesus.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/10348590\\_1004120959605292\\_1684827785795614703\\_n.jpg](https://datingjesus.files.wordpress.com/2015/10/10348590_1004120959605292_1684827785795614703_n.jpg)

The focus of our faith is be such reflections of Jesus that people will notice that something is different. When the followers of Christ act like Him and reflect His message of grace and hope, then the world will take notice!

It’s hard to criticize someone who is feeding the hungry, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and welcoming and loving the stranger in our midst! Rather than fight fire with fire, let’s fight fire with water – sending out springs of life that invite growth rather than discord.

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At one of my churches we had a year when Christmas fell on a Sunday. That’s a lot of work for the staff of the church! We’d have three services on Christmas Eve, Saturday, and another three on Sunday morning!

So what we decided was to have our three Christmas Eve services, but on Sunday, we told the people, “Don’t COME to church FOR service on Christmas Day; go our and be OF service ON Christmas Day!”

So people went out on Christmas to serve – the be Jesus’ hands and feet on Christmas Day. Some went out to feed the homeless; some invited people into their homes who had lost a loved one and were spending their first Christmas alone.

We wanted to let Jesus use us to love His people on the celebration of His birthday.

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We are to be reflections of Jesus – which is one of the images in our scripture for today. Malachi talks about the refiner’s fire.



<http://www.themetalbar.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/12/silver-in-crucible.jpg>

When you are working with silver or gold, it has to be purified first in order to be useful. The way that they do this is by heating it up to such a point that all of the impurities are burned off but that the doesn’t destroy the integrity of the metal. If you don’t heat it enough, impurities are still in it; if you heat it too much, it can have trouble cooling and will crack in unexpected places.

So how do you know when it is been heated to the right temperature? How do you know when the silver is perfectly refined? If you ask a silversmith, they will say, “When I can see my reflection in it.”

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So how do we know that we are becoming the followers that Jesus needs?

When the world can see His reflection in us.

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The Israelites of Malachi’s day were giving the appearance of being religious, but they weren’t really reflecting God. Their hearts were not in it. They seemed to want to do the least they could and still be considered “religious”.

And they found ways to soften their religion. Jesus talked about this centuries later when He criticized the Pharisees for “tithing mint and cumin and neglecting the weightier matters of the Law.”

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This is why God sent the message through Malachi,

***You are robbing Me! ...In your tithes and offerings! <sup>9</sup>You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! <sup>10</sup>Bring 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.***

In Malachi's day, the tithe was supposed to be brought to the Temple so that three things could be done – the priests and Levites would have something to live on (since they didn't farm or have businesses, but devoted themselves to the Temple), so that the Temple could be maintained and new areas could be built on, and so that the priests could care for the poor and those in need.

This wasn't to exempt the people – they were still expected to give to the poor, too. But that was not to be deducted from what they gave to the Temple. The Temple funds were used to do things beyond what any one person could do to help the poor.

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I sometimes hear people say, "You know, I tithe, but it doesn't all go to the church. I give part of it to Red Cross, and some of it to the United Way, and of course Uncle Sam takes a fair bit."

I believe Malachi would have a problem with that. According to what God told him, that's not what God said.

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### ***TITHE = TENTH***

The word "tithe" means "tenth". There's no changing that. You can't make a quarter mean 18 cents and you can't make an hour mean 42 minutes. "Tithe" means "tenth".

But people ask, "Is that gross or net?" According to what I see in the scriptures, that's gross. "Give of your FIRST FRUITS" – not what's left over after the government takes some!

I'll get into that in a later sermon at some point, but the essence behind giving of the first fruits is the trust that God will send second and third fruits. Tithing was a way of saying, "I trust You, God, that even if I don't understand it, You will make a way."

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What about the idea of giving 10%, but giving some to the church, and some to the St. Matthew's House, and some to the United Way, like that?

Malachi says, "Bring the WHOLE TITHE into the storehouse" – not part of it; not a fraction of ten percent, but that the whole tithe belongs to the church where you are serving and being fed.

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My wife and I give to many different funds and charities – but our tithe belongs to the church. ***The difference between a "tithe" and an "offering" is that the tithe is the ten***

**percent that you give to the church, and the offering is what you give above and beyond ten percent because you love God!** Technically you can't say that you have given an offering if you haven't given your tithe first!

Can I still give to the United Way, and Samaritan's Purse, and the "Save the Puppies Foundation"? Yes, you are free to give them as much as you want, as long as you have given your tithe to the church first!

This is not me saying this; this is Malachi! (Or, more properly, God speaking through Malachi!) And do you know, this is the only time that I have found where God says to test Him! In no other situation does God say to test Him except for this – in tithing.

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What if we did this – what if our church offered "Guaranteed Tithing"?

What I mean by that is, what if our church told everybody, "Tithe for three months. Try it out. Find a way to give 10% of your income, gross, to the church. And, if at the end of those three months, you find that your life is not richer and deeper and if your faith in God has not grown, we will give you all of your money back".

I have had one church take me up on that challenge – our Finance Committee agree to it. And at the end of that time, not one person asked for their money back. They found a new relationship of trust with God that they hadn't known before.

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Malachi realized that the people had come to trust in their own abilities rather than God's. They began to love their money and their own wisdom, and were finding ways to dilute God's commands.

Jesus faced the same thing. And His message was the same – "Trust God. Follow Him. Be less concerned with what you can keep, and more concerned with how God can use what you have to bring hope and healing to others."

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Now, we need to understand that this is not just about money. It's about priorities and recognition and what is important to us.

For some, it's money. For others, it's respect. For some people, their health or their family is most important to them.

This is where it gets difficult, because health and family and country and all of those things are important. But are those things eternal?

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A lot of those TV specials that I talked about earlier were all about how important it is to be with family at Christmas. (The Hallmark Channel has the most shows on that!)

But – and I have to be careful here – that’s getting into idolatry. My family is important to me, but if they become more important than my relationship with God, then it becomes sin.

This is why Abraham was tested, because he was tempted to love his son Isaac more than God.

In fact, if I DON’T put God as my first priority, I can never be the husband or father or son that God has called me to be! Only when I have my priorities straight on my standing with God can I truly be the best version of myself.

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***So how do you reflect God?***

***What does your refined soul look like?***

I’m sure refining is not a fun process. I really don’t think the silver enjoys that time in the crucible, being melted and stripped of everything else in order to be made pure.

And I know that I don’t like it when God refines me. But unless I submit to God’s refinement, I cannot become what He needs of me.

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When people see you, do they see Jesus? Do they see His compassion, His hope, His grace to those who deserve it least?

One of the things that I regularly challenge my congregations on is how we truly prepare for Christmas. Think about the gifts that you are giving –

Do they reflect that we are celebrating the Prince of Peace’s birthday?

Many of the books and gifts and toys that are being marketed today really are not about Jesus. Do I honor Jesus by giving war toys or violent movies to my family?

Do we reflect who Jesus was, and what He was about?

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“Test Me,” says God, “and see if I won’t bless you. Test Me and try Me, and I will then be able to pour out blessings upon you.”

Amen.