

What God Expects

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Date: 19 February 2023

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[0 : 0 0] Thanks very much, Derek. Good morning, everyone. I'll repeat the welcome as I gave you. Really good to have you with us, whether in person or electronically. It will help if you keep your Bibles open so you can refer to the passage as we go along.

I want to start this morning with an Only Connect type question. So I'm going to show four pictures on the screen, and you have to think, what is it that links? And I've not got buzzers, I'm not expecting you to shout out, but if you get after two or three, you can give yourself a pat on the back.

So here are the four pictures. First one is a rainbow. The second one is a sandy beach and a starry sky.

I'm sure a lot of people are getting there pretty quickly. The third one is a wooden box covered and decorated in gold. And then the fourth picture is a glass of wine.

I think some puzzle faces, some people have clearly got it. They're all signs of covenants in the Bible. The rainbow was the sign of the covenant that God made with Noah, that he would never destroy the earth again with a flood.

[1 : 1 2] The stars and the sand are the covenant God made with Abraham, when God said that his descendants would be as many as the sand on the seashore or the stars in the sky.

The wooden box is the Ark of the Covenant. It's representative of the covenant God made with Noah and with the Israelites. And in the Ark of the Covenant, among other things, were the tablets with the commandments on them.

And then the glass of wine is a symbol of the covenant that Jesus made with us, the new covenant. It is part of what we call communion. And Jesus said, this cup is the cup of the new covenant in my blood.

Four Bible covenants. There are more, but four key ones that are represented by these symbols. A covenant is simply an agreement or a mutual commitment.

Let me give you an example of a modern day covenant. When you go to a wedding, then the bride and the groom, they make their vows, and they make commitments to each other that are for life.

[2 : 2 0] Before the congregation, before God, they promise to be faithful, they promise to love one another, and all the other things that are part of the marriage ceremony.

That is a covenant, people making an agreement, committing themselves to one another. And in a covenant, we have commitments, and we have reasonable expectations of the parties to the covenant.

And the covenants in the Bible are just that. They are commitments made by God to his people, with a corresponding commitment by the people to God.

One difference from any other covenants is that the covenant isn't negotiated. It's not something that both parties discuss and agree to.

God says the terms of the covenant, because he is the great creator, but they are fair, and they demonstrate his love and concern for us. Now, when we come to the Old Testament, and particularly the prophets of the Old Testament, including Malachi, the prophets are covenant enforcers.

[3 : 29] They are largely there to remind the people of the covenant that God has made with them, and their responsibilities under it. And that's very much the case in the book of Malachi.

You can see Malachi as being based around six disputes. Six disputes between God and the Jewish nation. And in both of them, all of them, God says something, and the people respond in some kind of way.

And then God explains why generally the people are wrong. So the first dispute, the people say, well, how does God love us? We're not doing very well physically.

Has God broken his part of the covenant? And God says, no, I've not broken my covenant. I still love you. And then he goes on to make it clear that the covenant has actually been broken by the people.

That they've despised God. That they've not followed God in the way they should. That they've given substandard sacrifices. Given the worst of their animals rather than the best.

[4 : 39] That they've been unfaithful. Unfaithful in marriage, but also unfaithful to God. And in our passage today, God says, you've robbed me.

Strong language, isn't it? God says, you have robbed me. So we're going to think about what that means. And we're going to think about what it means for us.

And I think this is very relevant for us. Because if we think about what's happening here, we have a people who think that they're okay with God. God says, this is not like it was in the time of Elijah, when you had a king, Ahab, who was totally opposed to God and everything he stood for.

Not even like the time of Jeremiah, where Jeremiah preached God's word. And because of that, he was thrown into prison and put in a pit. In these circumstances, the nation was in many ways opposed to God.

And they were judged for it. But in this situation we're looking at today, the people were saying, we are God's people. We follow God.

[5 : 48] We live for God. And they're thinking God's not doing his part of the bargain. And God's saying, no, actually what's happened is that you're not keeping your part of the covenant.

You're not doing what you committed to do. So let's say we'll go through the passage first and try and work out what it means in its original context for the people of God.

And then we'll go back through it again and we'll learn some lessons for today. So three headings as we think about the original meaning, an unceasing covenant, an uncomfortable claim, and an unchanged commitment.

So we'll start to take it verses six and the beginning of verse seven. And God says, you need to return to me. That's in every part of verse seven.

Return to me and I will return to you. Now for a people to return to God, they must have gone away from God, mustn't they? They can't have been living the way that God expected them to do.

[6 : 54] And having broken the covenant, you might think, well, God could have rejected his people. God would have said, right, that's it. The covenant's been broken. I'm having no more to do with you.

But God says, no, I'm not like that. I don't change. You may have broken the covenant, but I am still adhering to the covenant if you meet the conditions attached to it.

I'm not just a God who demands of you. And if you don't do what I say, I'll destroy you. Rather, I'm a God who is merciful and who understands your weaknesses and has mercy on you and not destroying you.

But I'm a God of justice. And the law demands that you do the things that I have said. And if you don't do it, the law says you will lose out on my blessing.

So in this case, the crops weren't yielding what the people expected them to. They were going through a period when physically things were quite hard for them. And God says, I could have destroyed you.

[8 : 07] I could have said, I want no more to do with you. But my covenant is still intact. In fact, return to me and I will return to you.

I am a merciful God and his covenant hadn't stopped. He then makes what I've called an uncomfortable claim. So the people come back and say, well, how can we return?

We've never left you. Why are we to return? And God says, you robbed me. You have taken things that are mine and have treated them as if they were yours.

The people say, well, how is that? How have we robbed you? And God said, you haven't given what you were due to give under the covenant. You haven't given the tithes and offerings that were due to me.

Let's just take a minute to think about tithes. It's a concept that will be familiar to many people, but perhaps not to everyone. So tithing is giving to God.

[9 : 14] Why do we do it? Why should the Israelites do it? Because everything we have comes from God. Nothing that is ours is because of us or because we are wonderful.

It is because God has so graciously provided this wonderful world we live in and everything in it. It all belongs to him and we are simply giving back something that comes from God.

Giving it in this case to some extent out of duty because the covenant said that the Israelites would give a tithe, a tenth of everything they had. But also giving out of love and thanksgiving.

Recognizing that our great God is so generous to us and has given us so bountifully. So a tithe is a recognition of all that we have comes from God.

And in the Old Testament context, as the Israelites gave their tithe, what it was was a tenth of all their crops, their fruit, and their livestock. Ten percent of everything that they made, everything that came to them, was to be given to God.

[10 : 30] They could give on top of that. They could give additional offerings to show their love for God and for all that he had done for them. But ten percent, one tenth, was the minimum.

And it wasn't just to show their obedience and their love to God. It had a specific purpose as well. The tithe went towards God's work, God's workers, the Levites, the Levites and the priests, and the poor.

And there are various rules about how it was divided up and how it was to be given. But it was for God's work for those who served God full time and it was for those who were going through times of particular need.

And if people gave generously, if they gave their tithe and did it willingly and maybe on top of that, then says God, I will bless you.

And the outcome of being obedient to God was that the people experienced his blessing in their lives and at that time it was largely talking about a physical blessing. The nation was at peace, didn't have other nations round about trying to take it, or it was that they had good crops that God prospered them.

[11 : 44] And God says, you've been robbing me by not giving your tithe. Now notice what he says, he says, give all your tithe. So it wasn't that the Israelites had said, we're not giving God anything.

We're going to keep it all for ourselves. They were making a bit of an effort but not enough. They were thinking a bit is enough for God, doesn't really matter if it's not the full amount that he's asked for.

And God says, no, the covenant says, give your 10%, give your tithe, that is what I expect from you. And then finally, as we look quickly through this section, there is an unchanged commitment and that in verses 10 to 12.

Throughout the Old Testament, God has said, if my people honour me, then I will honour them and they will know my blessing. And he says the same thing here in quite colourful language.

He says, I will throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing there will not be enough room to store it.

[12 : 54] I think when he talks about opening the floodgates of heaven, he is talking particularly about the rains coming. Perhaps the rains had been withheld because of the disobedience of the people.

God will provide enough rain and more so that they can get the best possible crop from their land. And alongside it, he says, I'll also stop the pests devouring your crops, the locusts and the others that would come in and would take the valuable crops from the people and I'll make sure the grapes don't fall from the vine before they're ripe.

In other words, God says, if you honour me, if you give me what is due to me, you won't lose out because I will bless you abundantly.

I wonder if in the background here the people are saying, well, we've not got very much at the moment. We're not very well off because our crops haven't been particularly good.

So we're going to have to cut back on the amount that we give to God. We're going to have to give less than 10% because we're not feeling very well off and it's going to hurt us if we give more.

[14 : 07] And God is then saying to him, no, you've got it the wrong way round. You don't expect me to bless you and then you will get the blessing. And then you can give to me, rather.

Don't expect me to bless you and then you give to me. Rather, you do your part and I will then bless you. So that, broadly speaking, is what the passage says.

And then at the end, there's this wonderful thing that the Lord says is not just going to be for you. all the nations round about will see what a delightful land you have.

In other words, as God's people obey him, as God blesses them, then the people around look on enviously and say, this nation which God has blessed, how can we get that blessing?

Why is God so wonderfully doing this to them? They will be called blessed. So how does that apply to us? A lot of Old Testament passages we can't just take and say, here's what happened then.

[15 : 06] Exactly the same thing must apply to us. Let's just move it over and put a Christian context to it. We have to look at passages in the context in which they were written and in the circumstances of the time.

So let's go back through the passage and let's think how it might apply to us. And I've got three G's for this section. The same verse is grace, generosity, and gain.

So to begin with, as I said at the start, we're talking about a covenant here. God's covenant with the Israelites under which if they were obedient to him, he would bless them.

It was a covenant based on God's law and on what the people did as they saw and sought to obey God's law. Be obedient to God and he will bless you.

Now we said that we said at the beginning there is a new covenant, a different covenant that has been given to us under Jesus. And the basis of this new covenant is not that we do lots of things, that we obey God's law and then he blesses us for it.

[16 : 18] Rather, the new covenant is based on God's grace or on God's undeserved favour on it. And the basis for the new covenant is that God blesses us and then in response to that, as a thanksgiving to that, we are obedient to what he calls us to do.

Do you get the difference? On the one hand, you've got, you do this and you'll get the blessing. On the other hand, you've got the blessing. Now it's your responsibility to be obedient to it.

The one covenant based on the law, the other covenant based on God's grace. But they do have some things in common. We talked about God's justice and God's mercy.

God's justice in that if the people didn't obey, didn't keep the law, then they would lose out, the conditions of the law would come into play. God's mercy that the people weren't destroyed even though they hadn't obeyed his law.

And the new covenant is also based on God's justice and God's mercy. God's justice that says if you sin, then there are consequences of that.

[17 : 36] That the person who sins deserves God's divine wrath, God's punishment for what they've done. But there is justice in the new covenant because Jesus took that punishment.

The punishment that was due to us, Jesus went to the cross and took on himself so that if we trust in him, then through the grace of God, we are forgiven for all the wrong we've done.

We are restored to a relationship with the almighty God of heaven. It's not that the old covenant was about justice and the new covenant isn't.

God's justice hasn't changed. God hasn't changed. But in his grace, he has satisfied his justice by his son, the Lord Jesus, taking the penalty.

So by grace, we are saved through faith in the Lord Jesus. And we still have that mercy of God but so wonderfully displayed through Jesus.

[18 : 37] So much clearer to us what a merciful God we have. That we who deserve nothing, we who had nothing, we who should have been punished for all the wrong we've done.

God, if we trust in Jesus, has wiped that out and we have experienced his mercy. If we know the Lord Jesus, we should be rejoicing in that today.

But as we rejoice, as we come with thankful hearts before God, then we want to be obedient to him as well. Not so that we'll gain from it in any material sense, but because we love the Lord Jesus, we love everything that he has done for us.

Under the old covenant, the law was summed up by love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength and love your neighbour as yourself. Well, that hasn't changed.

But actually, we could really simplify things and say under the new covenant, what is expected of us is that we be like Jesus. That we look at the Lord Jesus and what he was, all that he did, all the love and care he showed for others.

[19 : 54] And that is our example. And if we can be like Jesus, then yes, we will love the Lord our God with all our heart, soul, mind and strength and our neighbour as ourselves. But we'll do it out of gratitude and out of love for him.

We have experienced God's grace if we have trusted in him. And therefore, we should be of a real desire to obey him and to live for him.

Let's move on. And the following verses were about giving, about the tithe that the Israelites had to give to God. And the question then arises, should we be tithing today?

How should we give to God? How much should we give to God? I'm not here to guilt trip anyone into giving to the church or to anyone anything else.

But I do want us this morning to take very seriously our finances and our responsibilities with them. I'm sure there are some people here who give very sacrificially to God.

[21 : 03] Might be to the church, might be to other Christian work, might be to the relief of those in need, relief of poverty and those who have particular needs. There are some who give what they can afford and more for that and make great sacrifices so that they can demonstrate their love for God and show it to others.

I expect for a lot of us, we give. We give maybe a reasonable amount, but it doesn't hurt us that much. We give what we can afford and we do it for God's work, but it's not really making us feel any worse off materially.

Perhaps there are some people who don't give at all, maybe haven't even thought about giving. So what does the Bible say to us about how we should give? Now there are two views on tithing.

One is that the pattern was set by God in the Old Testament. You give a tenth, that is the core of your giving, and Christians shouldn't work to a lower standard than that.

Christians should give a tenth of everything they make to God's work. The second view is that everything I have belongs to God. I don't want to get caught up in legalistic things.

[22 : 21] I will give as God enables me, as God puts it on my heart. Now both of them have good points. Systematically giving a tenth means we are giving a good amount to God's worth.

Giving when God leaves it in our heart is also good that we're not giving mindlessly, that we're giving as God prompts us to. The danger with tithing is that we could come up with an attitude that says, well a tenth of what I get is God's and the rest is mine.

I've done my duty to God and that's it. I can do what I like with the rest of it. The danger of not tithing is perhaps we give quite a lot less than 10%.

If only when we feel called to give we give money, then there's a good chance it actually won't be that much. And in particular, if we're having a month when things are maybe feeling a little bit tight, we might say, well this month I won't give quite as much, I've not really got very much to give.

Our giving to God takes lower priority than other things. So good points and bad points with both. Let me focus for a minute on a verse from the New Testament and we'll try to learn from that and come to a conclusion.

[23 : 41] So this is Paul writing to the church in Corinth. A couple of chapters, chapters 8 and 9 of 2 Corinthians, well worth reading in the context of thinking about our attitudes towards money.

Paul's encouraging the Corinthians to give generously to help Christians who are going through times of poverty. And he says this, each one of you should give just as he decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, because God loves a cheerful giver.

Can I suggest that this verse presents three attitudes towards giving to God? The first we could call grudge giving.

I'm giving because I feel I'm obliged to. I've been made to feel guilty that I'm not giving. I think I shouldn't really need to, but it's going to cost me.

I'm not really wanting to do it. And yes, giving in that way is better than not giving at all, but it's not giving that's going to bring us great joy and great satisfaction in our lives.

[24 : 50] Second kind of giving you might call duty giving, under compulsion. So this is people who may be tithe or maybe give a different percentage, but they think, I need to be systematic in my giving.

I want to do that, but I'm doing it out of a sense of duty. A bit like the Israelites here were being told, give your tenth, don't give the lower amount that you're giving.

So people are saying, I know I need to give and I'll give a certain amount, but I'm doing it out of a sense of duty and they don't really get any benefit, any blessing from it.

Better than giving grudgingly, better than not giving at all, but perhaps not really bringing us the blessing that God would want us to give. And so the third kind of giving I've called thanksgiving.

This is giving because God has given to us and we want to give back to him and we want to give towards his work and towards the blessing of others.

[25 : 52] It is giving cheerfully and willingly even when it costs us because we know it is what God wants us to do and we want to be obedient to God and to his word.

Really great if all our giving came into that thanksgiving category. Now just as I finish on thinking about giving, come back to this question of tithing.

How should we give to God's work? I think, and I'm not forcing this on anyone, I think it's good if we have a portion of our giving that comes automatically out of our bank account and in a sense we don't see it and don't miss it.

So every month we know we're giving a certain amount towards God's work and that is fixed. On top of that, God may well prompt us and put a need before us whether a Christian need or a need in our world situation.

Turkey at the moment would be an example. Being willing to give on top of our regular amounts. And one last thing. For some people I've said giving 10% would be a major sacrifice and some people do it and that's highly commendable.

[27 : 11] For many of us 10% probably isn't enough. If God has given us abundantly of what we have, if we have all we could need and more, then we shouldn't be seeing 10% as a cap or as a norm.

It may be a useful guideline but many of us can afford to give much more than that if we want to and if God calls us to and to do it cheerfully. I'll leave that with you to think about.

But let's come on to the last couple of verses and there are differences of views on this as well. If we give to God's work, if we give money to God, should we expect to receive more from God in return?

If you listen to many preachers, particularly American preachers, they would suggest if you give to God, you can expect to receive much greater material blessings back.

Sometimes it's called the health and wealth gospel. Is that what we should expect from God? Well, let's go back to what we said earlier about the covenants.

[28 : 21] Under the old covenant, you gave to God and God blessed you. And that is what the writer in Malachi is talking about here. God is saying that my covenant is if you're obedient to me, I will honor that and you will be blessed through it.

Under the new covenant, the blessing comes first to us. We have been blessed by God with the salvation through the Lord Jesus and everything else that we have. And as a consequence of that, we should have a real desire to give to him, to give our time, our gifts, and our money and not to expect a lot in return.

We will be blessed by giving. We will be blessed by the knowledge that we are obeying God, that we are joyfully serving him, that we are helping others and helping God's work through what we give.

We will know also that we're building up treasure in heaven. If we honor God in this world, he will honor us in the next. But we shouldn't be doing it so that we will be better off materially.

Indeed, if we're giving sacrificially, we should expect to be worse off materially, but much better spiritually. Let me end this section with a quote from C.S. Lewis.

[29 : 42] C.S. Lewis in his book Mere Christianity says this, I don't believe one can settle how much we ought to give. I'm afraid the only safe rule is to give more than we can spare.

In other words, if our expenditure on comforts, luxuries, amusements, etc., is up to the standard common among those with the same income as us, we are probably giving away too little.

If our charities, and I would encourage Christian giving, do not at all pinch or hamper us, I would say they're too small. There ought to be things we should like to do and cannot do because our charitable expenditure excludes them.

I'll leave that takeaway and think about. You may or may not agree with it, but these were the words of C.S. Lewis. Let's try and get away directly from giving and let's pull things together as we finish this morning.

There was a company called F Secure who ran an experiment a few years ago. They're an online security company. They went to Canary Wharf in London.

[30 : 52] Canary Wharf, many people will know, is a big complex of businesses, high-rise towers and so on. They went to Canary Wharf and they set up in a cafe and they got out a Raspberry Pi microcomputer and a wireless aerial.

Connected the two together with elastic bands apparently and set up a Wi-Fi hotspot. Most people feel with a Wi-Fi hotspot. If you go somewhere where you've not got a mobile phone reception, you might look on your phone and see if there any Wi-Fi nearby and if you find something you log onto, then you can do your internet.

So this company, they set up this Wi-Fi hotspot just using a Raspberry Pi and a little aerial. And as many companies do when they offer us hotspots, they added some terms and conditions.

And the terms and conditions, long list as usual, but the terms and conditions included a clause that says, in return for free Wi-Fi, I commit to giving you my firstborn child to do whatever you want to with them for the rest of their lives.

And they called that the Herod clause in the contract. And in a very short time, they had a good number of people who signed up obviously hadn't read it or didn't believe what was said.

[32 : 12] And we might have some sympathy with them. I think one of the times when Christians routinely lie, maybe don't feel guilty about it, is when you tick that box that says, I've read all the terms and conditions of this contract.

And perhaps we should read them more carefully. But the point of that is, these contracts we could compare to the law in the Old Testament. It's complicated.

It's difficult to understand and difficult to meet completely. Apparently, on average, there are two and a thousand words in these online contracts. You take about ten minutes if you read every word.

So things are difficult. Israelites signed up to them, maybe not realizing what they were signing up to. And it was really difficult. In fact, it was impossible to keep the law of God.

When it comes to the new covenant, it's very simple. Yes, there are guidelines in the Bible. Yes, we can read what God expects from us, particularly in the letters of the New Testament and the instructions that are given there.

[33 : 19] But it's not that there are lots of hidden terms and conditions and if we don't keep to them, then God will reject us. Rather, under the new covenant, God has accepted us for what we are in all our sin, in all our inadequacy, if we've trusted in him.

And that's not going to change. But we have the opportunity, very simply, as I said earlier, to try to be like Jesus, to live the way that Jesus lived, and to become more and more like him.

We're not governed by lots of rules. As I also think I said earlier, it's not a lower standard. Being like Jesus is a standard we'll never reach in this world.

But we should make every effort because he died for us, we love him, we care about him, we want him to be glorified. And in our lives, whether it's in our giving, whether it's in our relationships, with others, whether it's in our service, or whatever other area, if we truly love the Lord Jesus, if we have truly experienced his grace, what God expects of us is that we seek to be like Jesus and to live lives that are pleasing to him.

May that be true of all of us. Let's pray together. Father, we thank you for your word this morning. We thank you for this very powerful passage from Malachi and for the way that you very strongly condemned the people because they were half-hearted in their attitude towards you.

[34 : 53] They were robbing you by not giving what they should have. We pray that you help us not to be half-hearted as we have experienced abundant grace through the Lord Jesus.

Help us to be willing to give and to give again of all that we have. Help us to know the joy that comes from being obedient as we seek to follow him.

We pray for any who maybe don't know the Lord Jesus this morning, who haven't yet experienced his grace. We thank you that Jesus died so that they could be forgiven and we pray that they will come in faith and put their trust in him.

We thank you for this time together. We commit ourselves to you now in the name of the Lord Jesus. Amen.