

# A GENEROUS RETURN POLICY

a sermon by

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**October 22, 2006**

*Text: "From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, 'How shall we return?'"*

*Malachi 3:7*

In life, there are some events and their outcome are certain and unavoidable. With the World Series being played, absolutely no one is surprised by the fact that neither the Chicago Cubs nor the Texas Rangers are playing.

In another of life's situations, there is the inevitability of car repairs. In their nationally broadcast radio program, Car Talk, the hosts, Tom and Ray Magliozzi (also known as Click and Clack the Tappet Brothers) joked about their garage's counseling services and their willingness to help you through the five stages of automotive grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression and, of course, a new car loan.

Yes, in life there are a few events that cannot be avoided – among them is an occasional sermon quoting this famous text from the Old Testament Book of Malachi, "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me," says the Lord. "But you say, 'How are we robbing thee?' In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you."

These words sound harsh, judgmental, and perhaps even angry. With such strong language, it sounds as though they leave no room for grace or for growth. While some events are unavoidable, there remains plenty of room for life's occasional surprise. Perhaps Malachi's harsh-sounding words will leave you a bit surprised.

## *I.*

This little Book of Malachi is not well understood and, to be honest, is rarely read.

Some people may find it helpful to know that this book was written some 460 to 450 years before the birth of the Christ-child. That dating would have this writing coming from the same era of Zechariah. The content of

Malachi's text, and specifically, the absence of any reference to the existence of the Priestly Law as recounted by Ezra, indicates that the Book of Malachi was written *before* the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Esther.

Some people may find it helpful to know that. If, for example, you are tired but unable to sleep, a lecture of the history behind Malachi's text may be very helpful to you. But, since the Book of Malachi is not widely read, most people won't have any idea as to what I'm talking about.

The references to the historic events place Malachi's writing in the time that the people of Israel were in exile. Many years before, the nation of Israel became divided and was torn into two separate kingdoms – Israel and Judah. Eventually each of these kingdoms was conquered and the people were carried off as the spoils of war. In the generations that followed, the people of God remembered the God of their people. Even though they learned the language of their captors, many of the people continued to learn the stories that are now included in our Old Testament. Those people knew that their homeland, a place that was important to their very identity, had been lost because of the sinfulness of their forefathers. They were separated from the land of God's promise – set apart by time, some 300 years, and by distance, many hundreds of miles.

The land of God's promise had been lost because of the stubborn sinfulness of God's own people. The people were not faithful. They were forgetful of their God. But the LORD God remained faithful; never forgetting his chosen people.

With the words of Malachi, the voice of the living God could be heard calling out; calling through the years and across the miles. The voice of God was heard by a people who, by the loss of their promised homeland, would certainly have encountered and even questioned the reasons for life's terrible hardships.

Malachi's message begins with encouraging words.

“I have loved you,” says the LORD.”

“But you say, ‘How hast thou loved us?’”

The answer goes on to include this statement:

“If Edom says, ‘We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,’ the LORD of hosts says, ‘They may build, but I will tear down, till they are called the wicked country, the people with whom the LORD is angry for ever.’”

“Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, ‘Great is the LORD, beyond the border of Israel!’”

Using a series of questions and answers, Malachi speaks clearly of the enduring, unfailing faithfulness of God – even when that faithfulness cannot be readily identified. Malachi is very clear about the fact that our hardships and our suffering, as difficult and painful as they may be, are not and will not be the final act of God.

God's love for his people becomes a central theme woven throughout the Book of Malachi. So great is God's love for his people, that the people will cry out, “Great is the LORD, beyond the border of Israel!”

Within this message of God's love and faithfulness, there comes a call for the people to return to God. This message begins with the uncomfortable assurance of God's promise to return. That assurance is uncomfortable because it will require all people to stand in the presence of God's judgment.

“Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold,

he is coming, says the LORD of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap....”

In this context of God’s judgment, we can hear, even today, God’s call for His people to return.

“From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’”

Even today the voice of the Lord can be heard calling out, “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts.”

It is only fitting and fair that we ask, “How shall we return?”

## *II.*

The people of Malachi’s era really are not all that different from the people of our day. Their circumstances are not entirely different from ours. Though their language spoke nothing of electricity, the internet, or multiculturalism, they certainly knew life in a community of people who were very different from themselves. They saw themselves as a religious people. They knew and were able to read the scriptural stories of God. They appointed priests to lead them in worship. They even gave of their possessions to support the work of the church. As a religious community, we live and act very much the same way as those who preceded us by 25 centuries. However, today our giving patterns and motivations are different from any generation that has come before us.

Church consultant Lyle Schaller recently published an answer to an interesting question: “What is the most significant change in charitable giving by individuals in the United States during the past three or four decades?”

In answering that question, Schaller looked to a series of events that followed the tragic 9/11 attacks. In the weeks that followed, the American Red Cross established The Liberty Fund and received cash and pledges in the amount of \$564 million.

The Red Cross decided to spend \$300 million towards the immediate needs of the 9/11 victims and to spend the remaining \$264 million for “the long-term institutional needs of the Red Cross, such as improving its telephone and technology systems and providing reserves for future terrorist attacks.”

Many people objected to this decision of the American Red Cross, including some members of Congress. As a result, an investigation and Congressional hearings followed. Lyle Schaller summarized the testimony before Congress in this way.

“Those speaking from the old tradition of American philanthropy explained that when donors contribute their charitable dollars to a respected nonprofit institution, they expect and trust that institution to be a good steward and make wise decisions on who will be the ultimate recipients of those charitable dollars. In other words, the officials of that institution can and should determine the final destination of those dollars.”

“The new face on American philanthropy is donor-driven. Donors decide which causes they choose to support. The intermediary must either add value or forward those contributions to their designated recipients. The comments at that hearing suggest that the representatives of the American Red Cross were playing by the old rulebook, and the discontented donors assumed they were playing by the new rulebook. They thought they were contributing toward the welfare of the victims rather than to the treasury of a huge institution.”

In the old tradition, the institutions decided how to distribute and spend the money that they received. Today, in our new tradition, the recipient of each donation is determined by the donor.

### *III.*

In a moment of honest self-reflection, we must acknowledge the existence of a new giving pattern throughout our country and also within our congregation.

In my few months in Galveston, I have observed your generosity. Make no mistake about it, this congregation gives generously of money, of time, of influence and of knowledge.

Let us also be clear about the fact that we also represent the new day of American philanthropy. We very much want to direct our contributions to a specific need, a particular program, or perhaps even to a specific committee.

That is all fine and good; but, it does leave the church with two very significant problems.

The first crisis is rooted in the fact that this First Presbyterian Church does have pressing and expensive short-term capital costs and long-term institutional needs that are not included in our budget. The budget for 2006 and the budget proposed for 2007 do not include even one dollar for these predictable expenses. Our office equipment (our computers, telephones and televisions) and our other systems (including our burglar, smoke and fire alarms, our stoves, ovens, refrigerators, ice maker and light fixtures) cannot be repaired or replaced in a manner that is systematic, predictable and, more importantly, budgeted. This situation causes a great deal of stress to some people. (I should mention that when I say, "some people," you are welcome to read, "your pastor.")

This new era of American philanthropy, when in the context of the church, reveals a second, and even more significant, problem. We are the people of God. The theological foundations of our faith begin with acknowledgement that we and all that we possess are gifts received from the very hand of God. So it is not enough that we give as we see fit. It is appropriate that we give as instructed by the Lord our God. When we fail to observe and honor that instruction, there remains the matter of a curse.

Says the Lord, "Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me.

But you say, 'How are we robbing thee?'

In your tithes and offerings. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me; the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithes 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 an overflowing blessing.

Malachi's words sound so terrible – vengeful and very harsh. But, when read in their fullness, these words reveal the grace and the greatness of our God.

Remember that the people of God had strayed and remained unfaithful for year after year, even for century after century. And yet, after so many years of being forsaken, God simply invites his chosen people to return by simply living and acting with faith.

Bring the full tithes 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 an overflowing blessing.

Be very clear about this important fact – it is not God who chooses to curse us with a curse. It is we ourselves who subject ourselves and our community to this particular curse. We do this with our stubborn refusal to honor God’s simple instruction.

Our God stands ready to open a window and to pour down blessings upon us, if only we will let him!

Malachi is not speaking of our modern-day windows, a hole in the wall that separates the inside from the out. Malachi uses his language to describe a bit of lattice in the ceiling that allows smoke and fire to escape from the building. Elsewhere in the Old Testament (in II Kings, Isaiah, and Ecclesiastes) this word for a window is also used to describe our separation from God.

Throughout the Old Testament, this window is opened only three times. In the Book of Genesis this window is opened as God pours out an overflowing rain. In the books of the Kings (II Kings 7) the window is again opened as God sweeps across the earth to render judgment.

In sharp contrast to those events, Malachi is very clear that God will again open the window, only this time to “pour down for you an overflowing blessing.”

Reflecting on the Book of Malachi, one scholar commented, “In many respects, faith, according to the Bible, consists in waiting for God to act – waiting with the expectation that he will act; acting with the assurance that he will keep his word; trusting that the future will indeed bring that which he has promised. . . . Faith in the Bible strains out towards a future that it knows God is bringing, and it acts in trust and obedience and certain hope in accord with that future.”

I began by remarking that in life there are some events have outcomes that are certain and unavoidable. The Chicago Cubs and the Texas Rangers missed the World Series. For many, the final stage of automotive grief is a new car loan.

Another unavoidable fact of life is the reality of the Lord, our God. Our God is standing at the window that separates heaven and earth. He is ready to throw open that window and to pour down blessings upon us. If only we will let him. That much is certain. It is absolutely inevitable, unavoidable.

One important question remains. What now shall we do?

## END NOTES