

Feeding 5,000 — By Jennifer Deans

Are you a thief? Do you classify yourself as someone who steals things that don't belong to you? I know I personally don't. But the Bible tells us something different in Malachi. In Malachi 3, it tells us that we rob God. How exactly do we do that? Is there a beanstalk that I'm not aware of that someone planted a bean, like Jack and the Beanstalk, and it grew up to heaven, so we can climb the beanstalk and go up to heaven and steal some gold from the streets of gold? Or maybe we're taking some fruit from the Tree of Life so that we can live forever. Is that how we're robbing God? It's an interesting concept, when we think about it.

I'm going to come back to Malachi in just a moment, but before I do, I'd like you to imagine with me that you are taking a walk by the Sea of Galilee. As you're walking in this kind of desolate area, all of a sudden there's a crowd of people up on a hill. If I were there, I would be very interested. What's going on? So you make your way over, and as you make your way over, you see there's a Man up on the hill preaching. You ask around, "Who is this? Who's preaching?" And they say, "It's Jesus!" You intend to keep going past Him, but as you begin to listen, what He's saying begins to convict your heart and you find yourself planted right where you are standing. You realize that before you know it, the sun is beginning to go down, and you've been standing there all day long. You're hungry, but you have no food; you hadn't planned to stay there all day long.

You see Jesus whisper to one of His helpers. And then you see them kind of shaking their heads, not doing anything, and you overhear, "They're looking for food." And there's no way there's food here. There are thousands of people here. No one planned to stay. We're all hungry.

All of a sudden, the disciples say, "Jesus, send them home." So Jesus says, "Everybody, I need you to go home. You're getting hungry. Please leave." . . . That's how the story could have gone.

But that's not how the story went that day. The story could have gone any number of ways, but what really happened was, as you are walking by the Sea of Galilee, you notice a crowd of people, and they're crowded around Jesus teaching. As you stop to see who it is, you are drawn into His love and His stories, and you realize before you even notice that the day has passed. Your

tummy begins to rumble, and you're hungry. Just about that same time, Jesus' eyes connect with you, and it's almost like He knows you're hungry. He calls over His disciples, and says, "Feed them." And they're like, "What do you mean, feed them? We don't have enough money to feed them! How can we possibly feed them?"

Andrew brings over a little boy, and says, "Well, this kid has five loaves of bread and two fish, but what's *that* going to do with all of these people?" Jesus says, "Everybody sit down in groups of 50." So I sit down, and I am like, *What's going on? This doesn't make any sense.* Jesus takes the small snack that the little boy has, takes it in His hands, and He looks up to heaven, and says, "Father, I thank You for what You are about to do. Lord, show everyone who You are. In Your name we pray, Amen."

I'm not sure what that was all about, but then Jesus takes one of the small barley loaves and He breaks it, and He hands it to His disciples, and He takes another one, and He breaks it, and He hands it out, and He keeps taking and breaking and taking and breaking and passing. And before I realize it, He has given out way more than five barley loaves. He just keeps breaking and passing and breaking and passing. Mesmerized by Jesus, all of a sudden one of the disciples comes up to me, and says, "Well, here, would you like some?" And he hands me a handful of broken pieces. I begin to look at it, and it is *more* than what He started with. And as I eat, there's a murmur, there's a buzz, there's electricity in the crowd. *What's going on here? There's more food than what we started with!* And everybody eats to their fullest. And then I hear Jesus say, "Collect the leftovers." There are 12 baskets of leftovers that are collected—more than what we started with.

As we think about this story, who's the thief? Are you seriously going to tell me that if there were 5,000 men there, plus women and children, meaning there was probably close to 12,000 people there that day, that nobody else had food? Jesus had told the disciples—specifically Phillip—at the beginning of the day, when He saw the people coming, "You know, people are coming. Where can we buy food for all these people?" And the disciples were like, "There's nowhere we can buy food. We don't have enough money to pay for food for all of these people!" So all day, while Jesus was preaching, the disciples had been going around and they had been asking folks, "Do you have any food?" Maybe they asked "you." And maybe you had a pack of crackers in your back pocket, but you thought, *What's a pack of crackers going to do for all these people?* So you said, "No, I don't have any food." You know, I am a mother, and I always bring food with me for my child. So I *know* that there was other people that day who had food. But you see, only one little boy was willing to give his lunch.

Jesus tells us in the gospels that if we want to get to heaven, we have to be like a little child. Here is just one more example of what that means. You see, a child is willing to give what they have when asked. I know that my 4-year-old son, if I even ask him for a bite of his cookie, he'll share a bite with me—not that I really want to eat it after him. But that's what children are willing to do. And the little boy, when he looked at Jesus, was willing to give his lunch so that Jesus could have something.

How are we robbing God? In Malachi, it tells us that we are robbing God from a whole lot of things with our tithes and offerings. I'd like to read in Malachi 3:8-12. It says, "Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated me! But you ask, 'What do you mean? When did we ever cheat you?' (Maybe that's what the adults in the crowd were asking, if Jesus would have said they were cheating.) 'You cheated me out of the tithes and offerings due to me.' (You see, God has asked us for our tithes and offerings, and when we don't give them we are stealing from God. We're robbing God.) 'You are under the curse, for your whole nation has been cheating me. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in my temple. If you do,' says the Lord of Heaven's Armies, 'I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in! Try it! Put Me to the test! Your crops will be abundant, for I will guard them from insects and disease. Your grapes will not fall from the vine before they are ripe,' says the Lord of Heaven's Armies. 'Then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight,' says the Lord of Heaven's Armies" (NLT).

A lot of people see this, and first of all, the issue is that people don't realize they are cheating God, that they're withholding from Him and keeping from Him. But I want you to know right now that we cheat God when we withhold from Him what He asks. One of the things He asks of us is our tithes. And our tithes, according to Deuteronomy, is 10 percent of everything we earn. You say, "But 10 percent is so much money! I couldn't give that to God!" But when you think about giving it to God, you're misunderstanding. We need to understand that Jesus has already given us everything we have, and we are just returning 10 percent of it back to Him. "But that's still a lot of money!" What we fail to understand is that God never asks for something that is going to be detrimental to us.

That 10 percent—I promise you—if you're willing to give it to God, He will do amazing things. What really happens when we rob God is that we are not only robbing God, but we are also robbing ourselves of a blessing. *What do you mean, robbing ourselves of a blessing? That doesn't make any sense.* No, but here's how God's economy works. It's very different from the way the world works. When we invest, and when we obey, and we have that relationship—the loving, trusting relationship like the

little boy who was willing to give his lunch to God—we are part of a blessing. But if you were like every single one of the adults that day, maybe who had food, maybe who didn't—but I think a lot of them did—who were unwilling to share their food, you are robbing yourselves of a blessing you could have been a part of.

That little boy, when he left, had the most amazing story to tell for the rest of his life! Can you imagine being him, and for the rest of your life, or maybe going home and telling your mom or your dad, "You cannot imagine what happened today! Remember that lunch I took, you know, just the five barley loaves and the two small fish, you know the snack? Well, Jesus fed about 12,000 people with my lunch!" "No, come on." "No, no, I'm serious! You should have been there. Jesus asked me for it, and I gave it to Him, and I was a little hungry but I just love Jesus so much, and I wanted to be part of it—and if He wanted it, I was going to give it to Him. And then He prayed, and He broke it, and I got more. And I was so full after I was done! And you know what? Everyone else got to eat. And when we were done—look, see this basket? Jesus gave me one of the 12. There were 12 baskets left over!"

You see, what happens when we obey God and give back to Him what He is asking—even if it doesn't make sense to us, even if it's difficult, and especially with money because money is so personal to each one of us—He allows us to be part of the blessing that He has in store for us.

A lot of people try to use this as a math equation, though. They read in Malachi where Malachi says, "Test Me, put Me to the test. Bring *all* your tithes into the storehouse." And then God says, "If you do, I will throw open the storehouses of heaven, and you'll have blessings that are more abundant than you can count." So what we tend to do, especially as adults, we begin to see this as A plus B equals C. *So I'm going to give God 10 percent. He's going to throw open the storehouses of heaven, and I'm going to be rich! It's going to be fantastic!* Unfortunately, we begin to be like the adults that day.

How do you think the people responded immediately after Jesus fed everybody with the five loaves and two fish. Were they like, "Jesus, thank You so much. That was amazing!" Well, in John 6:14, it says, "When the people saw Him do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, 'Surely, He's the Prophet we've been expecting'" (NLT). OK, so that's good. At least they recognized He's

maybe the prophet God sent, so we're on the right track. But the next part is what bothers me. "When Jesus saw that they were ready to force"—did you hear that?—"force Him to be their king, He slipped away into the hills by Himself" (verse 15, NLT).

When the adults see the blessing that day, they see dollar signs. They see someone that could really help them with their war against Rome. They see nothing but wealth, and they see advantage. They *don't see Jesus*. They don't see a relationship. And you know what? God knows that this was very likely to happen. Many people, when they read Malachi, say, "Well, that doesn't work. You know, I've given my 10 percent and I'm still struggling financially. God hasn't blessed me." But you see, the blessings are not always what we define them to be. I guarantee when we obey God, and when we give Him what He's asking, we will be part of a blessing that is amazing.

Too many of us want to see God as Santa Claus, someone who's going to give us what we ask for if we put in our part. But if we do A, and God does B, and it always equals C, that is a contractual relationship; it is not an actual loving friendship relationship. And you know what? God has promised that He's never going to give us more than we can handle, and that also means making us rich, if we can't handle it. It also means He wouldn't give us "that relationship" if we can't handle it, because God loves us so much. When you actually read in Malachi where it says, "I will open the storehouses of heaven and there'll be so much you won't have enough room for it," the phrase that is translated there is also used in the Bible in a number of places. In one place, a similar phrase is used in Ephesians, where we are told that we can't even imagine the things that God wants to do for us. So on one end of the spectrum, the blessings that we get when we invest in God are way beyond what we could ask for or imagine. But on the other end of the spectrum, in Deuteronomy and in Psalms, that same phrase is used for if you have done something wrong, you're only supposed to get the amount of lashes or be flogged to the point of the crime. So in other words, if you just stole something, you shouldn't be flogged to death. There's a balance.

So in this understanding, when God promises to open the storehouses of heaven and to pour out blessings, what He is going to do is give you *exactly what you need* to experience His blessings. God goes on to define what it looks like for the Israelites—that their crops are going to be abundant, that there's not going to be disease, and that what is really important in Malachi 3:12 is "then all nations will call you blessed, for your land will be such a delight, says the Lord.' "

Too many times when we want God to do something for us, that's exactly it: We want God to do something for me. It's all about me. And if you can wrap your mind around God's economy, if you can wrap your mind around the way that God works, you see that Jesus left heaven. He gave up everything. He gave up His wealth, His riches, so that we would have an opportunity to know and love Him. He wasn't thinking about what was good for Him, what was comfortable for Him. In this Christian life, it's really easy to get very egotistical and self-centered, and think only about "me": *What's going to be easiest for me? Well, if I give 10 percent, that means I'm not going to be able to buy those extra pair of shoes I want, or that means I'm not going to be able to do x, y, and z, or go out to eat as much as I want to. It's going to really limit my ability.*

But you see, that is not the way God thinks. It's not about you. And it's definitely not about me. It is about God and His mission. When God pours out blessings, the entire reason He pours out blessings is because He wants other people to see how good He is and be drawn into a relationship. Part of the reason God asks us for our money is not because He is in need of money, because God has access to all the resources in the entire universe. He could just speak and there would be a pile of money sitting right next to you! That's not God's problem. God knows that when we give our money, we are letting go a little bit of our selfishness, that we are putting our money where our mouth is, and we are doing a little bit of what Christ did when He left heaven. He gave up some comforts. He gave up some riches, so that we could know Him.

And you know what I have discovered? That when I am willing to trust God and when I am willing to obey Him, especially with my finances, that He is able to use me to share His love with other people. That's what Malachi says. " 'When I bless you, when I pour out these blessings, after you obey me, the nations will know.' " You see, the whole point of living the Christian life is so that the nations know about Jesus, because if the nations know about Jesus, then we can go home to heaven. We can get out of this sinful world. It's not about me being comfortable in my Christian life.

You know what? I want to let you in on a little secret. God doesn't care if you're comfortable. He doesn't care if you have everything you want. He cares about you and your salvation, and He cares about His relationship with you. And you know what? God knows that in order to grow some of us, sometimes He's got to send us to the wilderness for 40 years, like He did Moses. Moses, when he started out with God, was born in Egypt. He ended up living in Pharaoh's household. He had the passion and desire, Acts chapter 12 tells us, to help God's people. But he wanted to do it *his* way. And in the process, he

murdered somebody and had to run for his life. God had to let him in the wilderness for 40 years, taking away the pomp and circumstance—all of the luxuries of the palace. It was in the wilderness that Moses discovered a relationship with God.

I want to challenge you to think about when have you experienced God the most? Has God shown up in your surplus or in your need? The little boy, the lunch that he had that day, according to John, was barley loaves. Barley loaves, according to some scholars, weren't fit for dogs to eat. They were the food of the poor, poor, poor. So it's this poor, poor, poor little boy who probably gave away the only food he had for the day that got to be part of the blessing. Now did the blessing mean that he now had reproducing barley loaves for the rest of his life, so he never had to worry about food? No! That's not at all the blessing. You see, the blessing is more important about what God is doing right now, and what people can experience.

And you know what? Just because you honor God doesn't necessarily mean that everyone around you is going to get it. The adults that day by the seashore, they wanted to force Jesus to be king. They didn't get the relationship. They didn't get the sacrifice. And in fact, when Jesus started breaking the loaves, nobody else said, "Hey, I've got some food, too. Let's add to this party." Nobody else stepped in. But that didn't stop the little boy from doing what he knew he was supposed to do, and because of that, he got to be part of the blessing.

Do you want to be part of the blessing? If you want to be part of God's blessing, let me tell you how to do so. It starts with obedience to what God is telling you to do. Maybe for you, obedience means that you actually begin to honor God with your finances. According to Malachi, God says, "Ten percent is mine." So when we keep that, we're stealing from God. But God wants us to give. So if you want to be part of the blessing, maybe you start right there, and you begin to give God 10 percent and your sacrificial offering. A sacrificial offering is what the little boy gave. It's not the 10 percent that God asks for, but it's over and above that. And it's giving *all* that the boy felt impressed to do, which was his entire lunch. Do you want to be part of the blessing?

Maybe you're already honoring God with your tithes and your offering, but there's something else in your life. Maybe you know that God has told you that you shouldn't be living with your boyfriend. Or maybe you know that God has told you that your

pursuit of wealth is getting in the way of a relationship with Him. There's lots of things that God is convicting us of. If you want to be part of the blessing God has in store for you, it starts with obedience to God.

You say, "Why obedience?" Well, Jesus tells His disciples that the sign that everyone will know that they are His disciples is that they obey His commandments. "That doesn't make any sense. Well, what do you mean, obey His commandments?" It's not obedience for the sake of obedience and checking off a list. It's obedience because of a loving relationship. You know, I do a lot for my husband that I don't particularly enjoy doing, because I love him. It's not hard because I love him and I know that he appreciates it, and that's what's important. It becomes difficult when we're doing it to check things off, to earn our salvation, to get right with God.

You see, none of this is about you earning a relationship or earning your salvation. All of this is about God desiring you to have the blessing He has in store for you. He wants you to have the freedom to know that when you honor Him with your 10 percent, that He's going to make up the difference. It doesn't matter, you don't have to have it all figured out. He wants you to know that when you honor Him by taking time on His Sabbath, that He's going to provide enough finances for your work the rest of the week, so that you can have time for a relationship with Him. He wants you to know, "It's about a relationship with Me. It's not about what you do, but a relationship with Me."

I want you to think right now: Are you a thief? Have you been robbing God—with your finances, with your talents, with your time? If you have been, I really want you to pause and think, *How am I robbing myself in the process? Am I hanging onto control because I have to take care of my finances myself? Am I hanging onto fear that it won't work out if I'm not in control, if I'm not doing it all the time?* What are you hanging onto? How are you robbing yourself of a blessing? You see, God promises us a peace that passes understanding. That means it doesn't make sense in the world's economy. But that's how God functions.

So my challenge to you is to be part of the blessing. Become like a child. Be willing to give what God is asking, knowing that He is going to pour out blessings that you can't even count. You can't even imagine what they all are or will be.

I'd like to ask you to make a commitment to do a few things. First of all, I want to challenge you—and I really want you to take this seriously—to sit down this week, and I want you to take out a pen and paper and write, “God, how have I been robbing You?” And then I want you to sit quietly for a while and let God begin to impress upon your heart and your mind what you have been doing that is robbing Him, but also robbing yourself of the blessing that He wants. I also want you to stop trying to *force* God to give you the blessing you think you deserve because of something you did for Him. That’s what the people in Malachi were doing. That’s what the adults were doing when they went that day to see Jesus. They wanted to force Him to be king. You’ve got to let go of your expectations of what God’s blessings are going to look like if you obey Him. I want you to respond like a child in obedience and participation in the blessing to come. That means full force, all-in: *God, it doesn’t matter how crazy it sounds because I know I can trust You.*

Then I actually want to challenge you to do something for 90 days. I want you to do what Malachi says. God says to bring *all* our tithes into the storehouse, and we will receive these blessings. So I want you to do that. For the next 90 days, I want you to mark it on your calendar. Here’s what I want you to do. I want you to either *start* honoring God by giving Him His 10 percent tithe, or I want you to *continue* with honoring God.

But that’s not all. So we start with tithe. But then I want the sacrificial part. I want you to give a sacrificial offering. So either *start* giving an offering, which is over and above the 10 percent; it could be a dollar, it could be 10,000 dollars. Or continue giving, or increase your offering. But I want you to continue doing that, because when we’re letting go of our money, we’re trusting God to take the difference.

And the last thing is, according to 2 Corinthians 9:7, “God loves a cheerful giver” (NIV). So I want you to commit right now to give cheerfully, because you know that this is part of the relationship with you and God. And I want you to write down the blessings that God brings, ‘cause you will need to remember them.