



WISE BUILDERS

WHEN GOD GETS YOUR FIRST

STUDY GUIDE

1 Corinthians 3:11-15 · Malachi 3:6-12

Series: Open Handed

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VERTICAL TAMP A

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

This guide walks back through Sunday's message, "Wise Builders," so you can dig deeper on your own or with your group. Read each section, sit with the Word Study and Key Line boxes, and let the questions move you from information to reflection. You do not have to answer every question in one sitting.

A suggested rhythm: read the Opening on day one, then one Movement per day across the next four days. On day six, return to the Big Idea and Build Wisely to reset before moving forward.

LAST WEEK IN OPEN HANDED

When we understand who God is, it changes what we are willing to surrender. We confronted the heart that withholds (selfishness), released the gift without resentment (the grieving heart), opened our hands to what God has placed in them (a generous heart), and remembered the God who brought us out (a grateful heart).

BIG IDEA

What God gets first reveals what my life is being built on.

A wise builder does not give God leftovers. The tithe is not God taking a piece of your life; it is you putting the whole of your life under His lordship by giving Him the place only first can occupy.

CENTRAL TENSION

You can remain connected to the place of worship while becoming disconnected from the purpose of worship.

1 CORINTHIANS 3:11-15, NLT

For no one can lay any foundation other than the one we already have: Jesus Christ. Anyone who builds on that foundation may use a variety of materials: gold, silver, jewels, wood, hay, or straw. But on the judgment day, fire will reveal what kind of work each builder has done. The fire will show if a person's work has any value. If the work survives, that builder will receive a reward. But if the work is burned up, the builder will suffer great loss. The builder will be saved, but like someone barely escaping through a wall of flames.

Foundation before materials. The foundation is already settled: Jesus Christ. The question Paul raises is not whether you are on the foundation, but what you are building on it. Fire does not test how much you built. It tests what kind.

REFLECT BEFORE YOU BEGIN

1. When the subject of tithing comes up, what is your honest first response: openness, defensiveness, or fear?
2. If the fire tested what you are building right now, what do you think would remain?

OPENING · WHO THEY WERE

MALACHI 3:6-12, NIV

"I the LORD do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?' In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse (your whole nation) because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe," says the LORD Almighty. "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

Post-exile Judah, roughly 460-430 BC. About a century after the return from Babylon, Malachi ministered in the same era as Ezra and Nehemiah. The temple had been rebuilt (516 BC), the walls had gone up under Nehemiah, and the early revival fire of Haggai and Zechariah's day had cooled. They were still God's covenant people, in the land, in the temple. Nobody had quit God. Notice what the drift looked like:

- **They questioned His love.** The book opens with it: "I have loved you," says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'" (Malachi 1:2).
- **Worship went through the motions.** Priests offered blind, lame, and stolen animals (1:6-13), sacrifices God said He would rather someone shut the temple doors than accept. They treated serving Him as a burden (1:13).
- **The priests corrupted the covenant of Levi** (2:8).
- **Covenant-breaking at home.** Marrying outside the covenant and divorcing "the wife of your youth" (2:11-14).
- **Calling evil good** and asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17).
- **Social rot underneath the religion.** Sorcery, adultery, perjury, and oppressing hired workers, widows, orphans, and the foreigner (3:5).
- **Withholding the tithe** (3:8-10). Nehemiah 13:10-12 shows the real-world result: the Levites' portions stopped, so the ministers left the temple to work their own fields. The storehouse system actually collapsed.
- **The drift always arrives somewhere.** "It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of keeping His charge?" (3:14).

You can remain connected to the place of worship while becoming disconnected from the purpose of worship.

Drift is not distance; it is decline. They never left the building. They just stopped bringing God their best. The tithe issue in chapter 3 is not the whole disease; it is the symptom God puts His finger on. People who drift almost always drift first in what they give God. They did not set out to rob God. They slid into leftovers.

"I the LORD do not change." God did not move. They did. And His remedy is not rejection. It is Malachi 3:7: "Return to me, and I will return to you."

God didn't move. They did.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Which marker of drift in Malachi's day feels most familiar in our culture today? In your own life?
2. Why do you think drift so often shows up first in what we give God?
3. What is the difference between being connected to the place of worship and the purpose of worship?
4. God's remedy is "Return to me." What would returning look like for you this week?

MOVEMENT 1 · TITHING IS A RESPONSE BEFORE IT IS A RULE

What is the tithe? The tithe is the first tenth (10 percent) of your increase: everything God puts in your hands, returned to God first, through His house.

- **It is a tenth.** That is literally what the word means. It is not “whatever you feel.”
- **It is the first tenth.** Off the top, before anything else moves.
- **It is returned, not given.** It was His first.

PSALM 24:1, NIV

The earth is the LORD's, and everything in it, the world, and all who live in it.

WORD STUDY · HEBREW AND GREEK

מַעֲשֵׂר (*ma'aser*) “tithe”

δεκάτη (*dekatē*) “a tenth”

Both words literally mean “a tenth.” The Hebrew *ma'aser* describes the portion of produce and livestock set apart for the Lord. The Greek *dekatē* is the word Hebrews 7 uses for the tenth Abram gave Melchizedek. The word itself defines the amount; the heart defines the posture.

The tithe is the floor, not the ceiling. Anything above it is an offering.

Tithing predates the law of Moses. Centuries before Sinai, Abram returns from rescuing Lot and meets a priest-king named Melchizedek.

GENESIS 14:18-20, NIV

Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine. He was priest of God Most High, and he blessed Abram, saying, “Blessed be Abram by God Most High, Creator of heaven and earth. And praise be to God Most High, who delivered your enemies into your hand.” Then Abram gave him a tenth of everything.

Tithing did not start as a tax. It started as a response. Before it was ever an instruction, it was worship. Before it was a law to obey, it was gratitude with a number on it. Abram was not paying a bill. Fresh off a miracle, he was declaring, “God, You did this. You are first.”

Before it was a law to obey, it was gratitude with a number on it.

HEBREWS 7:3, NIV

Without father or mother, without genealogy, without beginning of days or end of life, resembling the Son of God, he remains a priest forever.

HEBREWS 7:8, NIV

In the one case, the tenth is collected by people who die; but in the other case, by him who is declared to be living.

Notice three things about Melchizedek. Scripture records no genealogy (no father, mother, or ancestral line), no birth or death, and no successor. Under the Levitical priesthood, genealogy mattered: priests inherited their office through family lineage, and death ended their service. Melchizedek appears in Genesis 14 without a recorded beginning or ending to his priesthood.

The writer of Hebrews uses that silence in Scripture to present Melchizedek as a picture of Jesus Christ. Melchizedek is described as resembling the Son of God (Hebrews 7:3). He points toward Christ rather than being identified as Christ. Scripture does not record Melchizedek's death; it does record Jesus' death, resurrection, and everlasting life. Hebrews 7 is not ultimately about proving Melchizedek was immortal. It is about proving Jesus is our eternal High Priest.

What Scripture leaves unrecorded concerning Melchizedek, it reveals as eternal reality concerning Jesus.

HEART QUESTION

Is my giving a response to what God has done, or a bill I resent paying?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Abram tithed fresh off a victory. What victory, rescue, or provision in your story deserves that kind of response?
2. How does seeing the tithe as "returned, not given" change the way you feel about it?
3. Why does it matter that the tithe is received by Him who "is declared to be living"?

MOVEMENT 2 · TITHING IS ABOUT POSITION, NOT PERCENTAGE

The tithe is the first tenth: off the top, before anything else moves. The number matters, but the position matters more. God is not only asking how much. He is asking where He ranks.

MATTHEW 6:33, NIV

But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.

PROVERBS 3:9-10, NIV

Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the firstfruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.

WORD STUDY · HEBREW

כָּבֵד (kabad) “honor”

רֵאשִׁית (reshit) “firstfruits”

Kabad means to treat as weighty, to give weight to, to esteem as heavy and significant. You do not honor someone with what is light, and you do not esteem someone with what is left. Reshit means first: first in place, first in time, first in rank. Not the only fruits. Not the best-sounding fruits. The first fruits.

Honor has weight, and weight is proven by what you put first.

When God gets the first tenth, it is a declaration that the other ninety percent is His too. The tithe is not God taking 10 percent so you can do whatever you want with the rest. The tithe is you putting the whole harvest under His lordship by putting Him in the position only first can occupy.

Tithing is a tool God uses to test the heart of who is first.

HEART QUESTION

Does God get my first, or does He get what is left?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Look at your last month of spending. What actually got first position?
2. What is the difference between giving God 10 percent and giving God first place?
3. How does the idea of “weight” (kabad) challenge the way you honor God with your resources, time, and attention?

MOVEMENT 3 · TITHING IS A MATTER OF FAITH

First confronts the fear of lack. The tithe is not hard because of math. Ten percent is not complicated. The tithe is hard because of fear. Underneath every act of first-place giving is a question: “If I put God first, will I have enough?”

MATTHEW 6:31-32, NIV

So do not worry, saying, ‘What shall we eat?’ or ‘What shall we drink?’ or ‘What shall we wear?’ For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them.

Tithing is not a tax on your income; it’s a testimony of your trust.

MALACHI 3:10, NIV

Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

Malachi 3:10 is one of the only places in Scripture where God invites His people to test Him. Notice the purpose first: “that there may be food in my house.” The tithe sustained worship and the people who served in it. The blessing God promises is His to give in His way. It is not a financial return we can purchase. We give because we trust Him, not to control Him.

PROVERBS 11:25, NIV

A generous person will prosper; whoever refreshes others will be refreshed.

2 CORINTHIANS 9:10, NLT

For God is the one who provides seed for the farmer and then bread to eat. In the same way, he will provide and increase your resources and then produce a great harvest of generosity in you.

Notice what Paul says God produces: not just more resources, but a great harvest of generosity *in you*. God is growing something in the giver, not just something for the giver.

God isn’t after your money. He’s after the place only first can occupy.

HEART QUESTION

What fear is speaking louder than my faith when it comes to putting God first?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Be honest: is your hesitation with tithing about math or about fear?
2. Where have you seen God provide in a season when you did not think there would be enough?
3. Read 2 Corinthians 9:10 again. What “harvest of generosity” might God want to grow in you?

MOVEMENT 4 · A WISE BUILDER LIVES POURED OUT

2 TIMOTHY 4:6, NLT

As for me, my life has already been poured out as an offering to God. The time of my death is near.

ACTS 20:24, NLT

But my life is worth nothing to me unless I use it for finishing the work assigned me by the Lord Jesus: the work of telling others the Good News about the wonderful grace of God.

WORD STUDY · GREEK

σπένδομαι (spendomai) “poured out”

To be poured out as a drink offering. In Israel’s worship, wine was poured out on the altar alongside a sacrifice, completely given and impossible to gather back. Paul uses this picture for his own life: nothing held back, everything offered to God.

The tithe is where it starts, not where it ends. Paul did not give God a portion of his life; he poured all of it out. This is what wise builders do. They build with gold, silver, and jewels, materials that survive the fire, because they have already decided that God is first in everything.

Go back to 1 Corinthians 3. Every builder stands on the same foundation. What separates them is the material. Leftovers are hay and straw. First place, faithfully given, is gold.

The fire doesn’t test how much you built. It tests what you built with.

HEART QUESTION

Am I building with what lasts, or with what is easy?

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Paul said his life was worth nothing to him unless it finished the work God assigned. What work has God assigned to you?
2. What would a “poured out” life look like in your current season: at home, at work, at church?
3. What are you building right now that you believe will survive the fire?

CLOSE · BUILD WISELY

MATTHEW 23:23, NIV

“Woe to you, teachers of the law and Pharisees, you hypocrites! You give a tenth of your spices (mint, dill and cumin). But you have neglected the more important matters of the law: justice, mercy and faithfulness. You should have practiced the latter, without neglecting the former.”

Remember the whole heart. The Pharisees tithed down to the herbs in their gardens, and Jesus still called them hypocrites. Their tithing was precise, but their hearts were far from justice, mercy, and faithfulness. Jesus does not tell them to stop tithing. He tells them not to let the tithe become a substitute for the heart God is after.

This is the balance of a wise builder: faithful in giving and faithful in living. The tithe puts God first in your wallet. Justice, mercy, and faithfulness put God first in how you treat people.

Practice the latter, without neglecting the former.

Final landing. The foundation is already laid. Jesus Christ is the only foundation that holds. God has not moved; He is still saying, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” He is not after your money. He is after the place only first can occupy. Give Him your first, and build a life the fire cannot burn.

THIS WEEK

- 1. Put it first on payday.** Before bills, before spending, before anything else moves: God first. Decide it before the money arrives, because emotion will always renegotiate what conviction already decided.
- 2. Give the first, not the leftovers.** Start with the tithe, the first tenth, and let generosity grow from there. Don’t give God the first of nothing.
- 3. Test Him in a season.** Malachi 3:10 is God’s own invitation. Give Him a season of first-place trust, and keep a written record of His faithfulness. Test Him; He said you could.
- 4. Answer each Heart Question honestly in writing.** Circle the one that hits hardest and talk to God about it.

A wise builder gives God the first and builds what the fire cannot burn. He is worthy of first place.