

The Chapel Ministry



CLEARCREEK
CHAPEL

Malachi

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*S*avoring the *S*upremacy of *G*od
*S*tudying the *W*ord of *G*od
*S*haping the *P*eople of *G*od
*S*preaching the *G*ospel of *G*od

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Introduction

Greatness of God's Electing Love

Malachi 1:1-5

Introduction

Malachi's name means "my messenger" and the first message from God to this carnal and careless people was "I have loved you".

The Duty of the Message

(v.1)

The first verse literally reads, "The burden of the Word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi." God had given Malachi a burden. The Word of the Lord is often called a burden in the Old Testament. Why do you think that is so? For two reasons:

- The Word of God is never light or trifling. It is never whipped cream. It is always thick and rich with truth.
- The Word of God will be rejected by many. Isaiah struggled with a ministry that was to communicate the glory of the Messiah to a people who would reject it.

So the Word of the Lord is a burden because it is heavy with glory and will be met with opposition. The very words designed for life will be an aroma to those who are living and a stench to those who are perishing. In understanding what it means to be faithful, I come to you with a burden, the burden of the Word of the Lord from this text. It is a burden because *this text is weighty* and *I am a frail minister*. And it is a burden because not all will believe what I say.

The teaching of this text has been pictured by one writer as a strange cloud coming toward us on the battlefield of life. We are surrounded by enemies and mortally wounded and cringing as we await the final blow. Suddenly we see this cloud approaching us in our misery and hopelessness, and some groan that this darkness should be added to all our miseries. But others remember the words of William Cowper's hymn,

Ye fearful saints fresh courage take,
The clouds you so much dread,
Are big with mercy and will break,
In blessing on your head.

The cloud comes over the wounded soldiers of the Lord of Hosts. It swallows them up and, lo and behold, within the cloud there is light. Slowly the cloud moves with its broken and wounded soldiers through the battle lines of the enemy. Then ten or thirty or eighty

years later all the soldiers in the cloud arrive safe beyond the battle and beyond the reach of pain.

Some of the enemy mock the cloud as it moves. They scoff and say, "It is a dark cloud." Some of their bullets penetrate the cloud and wound the soldiers of the Lord. But not one is ever lost from this cloud. No matter how rough the terrain or terrible the battle, the soldiers in this cloud survive the conflict and reach the place of everlasting peace.

In other words, the teaching of this text appears to some dark and foreboding and unapproachable. But for others it brings an awe and safety. There is a sense of trembling and speechlessness, for this is not like anything we have known. But inside the cloud the sense of peace and safety is as firm as the mighty Everest and as deep as the ocean of space and stars. May the Lord give us grace to see the glory of this teaching and the privilege of entering in.

The Declaration of the Message

(v.2a)

"I have loved you" says the Lord."

Why does God assert this? Why does He begin at this point?

Our Responses to God's Affirming His Love

We often respond to messages of God's love for us with sentimentality. We think emotionally. We want to feel feelings that we define as love.

We also respond with expectations of intimacy. We want to feel close to God. We want to think of Him as we do a close friend.

Some even respond with expressions of inadequacy. We are so unworthy.

God's Purpose in Affirming His Sovereign Love

Do these words ever cause us to tremble? Do they ever invoke in us a holy awe and reverence?

What emerges in the book of Malachi is that God's love is designed to show us a God whose goodness and greatness makes us tremble with reverent fear. Consider Malachi 1:6; 1:14b; 2:5; 3:5. Therefore the burden of this book is to unfold the love of God in such a way as to make us tremble before the majesty of God.

To Whom God Speaks Declarations of Sovereign Love

We tend to want to speak of the sovereign love of God to those who have some maturity in the faith. We feel that this is the meat of the Word and should be withheld until people are ready for it.

We also often feel that this is not the sort of doctrine to tell to the carnal, to weak, to those who are careless in their approach to God. We are afraid that they will turn away from such a God and push their spiritual recovery further away as they thrust away this doctrine.

But this is not how God thinks.

God has designed this truth (and it is truth, not an opinion nor a system), to shock the presumption and the flippancy of careless Christians—Christians whose grasp of the love of God is so shallow that it never makes them tremble but instead can make them careless and casual and carnal in His Presence.

The Doubting of the Message

(v.2b)

“How have you loved us?”

There are two ways to ask this question. And let us not fool ourselves that we would never say this. We may not verbalize it to others, but it is very visible to God.

The Accusation Expressed in the Question

These words convey an almost shocking disregard for the position, power and provision of God. How could an Israelite actually even say this? It is almost as though they are accusing God of not showing His love for them in a way they expected. In the face of God’s affirmation that He loved them, they have responded with “show me.”

But then, our wicked hearts are sometimes not far from this, are they? We expected certain things to happen in our lives, it for nothing else because we are Christians. We are frustrated and depressed when what we hoped for did not happen. Maybe it was a spouse, children, or career. Maybe the promotion or the bonus did not come.

We say, “How can all this happen if God really loves me?”

The Attitude Exhibited in the Question

There are many ways of questioning of God’s love that are evident to the diligent student of the Word. But, how do you describe the way of God’s love to you? We will all find this attitude in ourselves at times: we face the death of a loved one; we despair of our health; we see our finances washed away in the greed of others; we wither under the censure of brothers and sisters in Christ who ought to be sustaining and strengthening us.

Why? Because, we believe that God owes us. He is obligated in love to us and to express that love in ways that affirm us.

But listen to God’s answer to this question.

The Description of the Message

(v.2c-4)

What kind of answer is this? How is “I have loved Jacob, but I have hated Esau” an answer to their questioning of God’s love? In fact, does not this answer worsen our attitude and feed our accusations? Is it not a sad fact of history that most have gone to great lengths to show that the plain answer of God here is either not what He meant, is not a complete answer or is the wrong answer?

It is a Sovereign Love

(v.2b)

“Was not Esau Jacob’s brother.” This phrase is the key that unlocks the door to understanding God’s answer. These two brothers were twins. Esau was the elder and therefore born with all the rights and privileges, as every Jew knew. He should have inherited the blessing and become the father of the coming Messiah. But God passed him over.

The answer is simply that God’s love is free and sovereign. He is under no obligation to anyone. “I have loved you with a free, electing unconditional love—that is how I have loved you.”

- My love for you is *AN ELECTING LOVE* because I chose you for myself over your brother Esau (Romans 9:11-13)
- My love for you is *AN UNCONDITIONAL LOVE* because I chose you before you had done anything good or evil—before you met any conditions—while still in your mother’s womb (Genesis 25:24).
- My love for you is *A SOVEREIGN LOVE* because I was under no constraint to love you; I was not forced; I was totally in charge when I set my love on you.
- And my love for you is *A FREE LOVE* because it is the overflow of My infinite grace that can never be bought.

And this is how God has loved us. Is this how you would answer the question, how does God love you? To be true to the Word, you must.

Now, we must put away a cherished notion from our thinking. We wonder how it is that God could only love those He has chosen. When the full teaching of the Word should cause us to wonder that He should love any of us at all. Paul, in Romans 9:10-16 places the locus of salvation in God extending mercy. It is not that God withholds from wicked sinners what they all deserve—His love. No, in sovereign love He extends mercy and grace to some sinners. He was and is under no obligation to do that at all.

It is a Revealed Love

(v.2c)

That God loves in this way is not what we would have guessed. Nor is it even what many would have hoped. But it is what God has revealed as the way it is. God has chosen to extend His love in this way so that no one gets the glory but Him. This is clear from Ephesians 1, Romans 9-11 and a host of verses that declare that at the center of God's purposes and plans is that no one—absolutely no one—can boast in His Presence except to glory in Him.

It is a Discriminating Love

(v.3)

It makes a difference in the way God treats them. Both his present condition and his future estate will wither under the heat of the wrath of God.

It is my belief that this is the heart of love. We must be careful thinking of love and hate in God in precisely the same way we love and hate. We begin by responding with emotions that lead to actions. God begins with purposes leading to choices enlarged by emotions carried through in actions. In other words, God's emotions follow His purposes. Too often, ours do not.

It is a Determining Love

(v.4)

Though Esau and Edom, his descendants, may actually strive against the wrath of God, doing so only further exhibits their rebellion. They are sinners, God determines to punish their sin, they rebel against His punishment, God surely and finally strikes them down everlastingly.

Therefore, we must also take up a very Biblical idea. God is just as glorified in extending His grace to save sinners as He is exhibiting His holiness in judging sinners. The Book of Revelation is written to exhibit that Christ, the Lamb and the Lord, is all the glory in grace and wrath.

God shows His hate in four ways:

- He opposes their prosperity;
- He continues to oppose them when they resist;
- He gives them up to wickedness, so that they will follow their nature and meet God's wrath at the end;
- He is angry with them forever.

Why does God say this to them? Why say to a carnal and careless people that He has loved them with a sovereign, electing love? Why does He say that as well to you?

- To humble you;
- To take away your presumption;

- To remove every ground of boasting in yourself;
- To cut the nerve of pride that boasts over others as though your salvation were owing to anything in yourself;
- To put to naught the cavalier sense of self-reliance that lets you dally in God's Presence as though you were an equal partner in this whole affair;
- To make you tremble with tears of joy that you belong to God and that He is for you and not against you with His omnipotent power, saving purpose and electing love.

Is this all? No there is more

The Design of the Message

(v.5)

Here is how God wants us to respond to this message.

What God Wants Us to See

Requirement

We really must understand, see, believe what God says. We must see the effects of God's wrath on the wicked and His mercy that brings us salvation. We must bow to this sovereign love. In it, and in it alone is safety.

What God Wants Us to Say

Result

"The Lord will be magnified." This is the ultimate design of it all. God is magnified. He is exalted. He will be exalted. And that, everywhere. Not just in Israel, but in Edom. Not just in the saved, but in the sinner. There is no place that God will not be magnified.

Let us give Him the glory—all the glory for our salvation. Let us never grow weary in strengthening, spreading and savoring the vision of our majestic God, for "Great is the Lord beyond the walls of this church!"

Magnify Your Majestic God

Malachi 1:6-14

Introduction

Is God being worshipped this morning? Have we in our own worship disdained the Name of God; that is to say, we have not ascribed to the character and worth of God the value He is due by how we have prepared and participated in worship

The heart of Malachi's message to us this morning is this, "Disdaining worship dishonors God." Now our age demands that we posit this in a positive fashion lest we become legalistic, formal, or even worse, negative in our preaching. But this is prophesying. Its primary function was to point people to their sins, to the solutions for their sins, the heart issues that framed their sins and then to speak of future glories when there would be the fullness of godliness and sin would be no longer.

In coming to terms with the burden of Malachi, what emerges is that a carnal and careless people do not need soothing words of comfort, but shocking words of confrontation. Our sins are like water coming to slow boil, or like freezing to death—we become comfortable in them and until they destroy our souls. So, I have little this morning in the way of a positive, encouraging, soothing message. But what we have is truth. And it is truth that you need, to sustain your souls, slay your sins, and savor your God. May God's sufficient grace enable us to turn from despising God in dishonoring worship to magnifying our majestic God.

First, we must understand the message God was giving to Israel. We have to hear this passage in their context and then, having understood God's complaint, we can translate that complaint and properly hear it against us. So we begin by approaching the text.

Their Despising of God Exposed

(v.6)

The prophet moves to what is at the heart of Israel's failure. He accuses them of despising the Name of God.

In God's Reproach

God says to them, "You call me your heavenly Father and Master, yet you do not treat me with the honor or common respect you ought to give to your earthly father and masters." The fact that they do not give Him the honor and respect He is due is evidence that they despise the Name of God, that they do not value His Person or worth. This accusation is leveled at the priests, the spiritual leadership of the people.

In Their Response

They cannot conceive how they could possibly have despised God. In the light of what they are later accused of, it is unbelievable that they cannot see how it is that they have failed to magnify the worth of God!

God's summary indictment structures the rest of this pericope.

- As Father, He is not honored
- As Master, He is not respected

In Those Responsible

God speaks this complaint to and against the priests. They stood as God's spokesmen in Israel. They were charged with instructing on how to worship. They also were responsible with evaluating and responding to the offerings of worship Israelites brought.

Now, we have no priestly caste today who stand in exactly the same relationship. What they did in mediating for and offering up the sacrifices of Israel Christ has done once for ever. However, their spiritual oversight and teaching roles God has entrusted the elders. In that capacity, we must also evaluate and respond to the worship of the people for whom we are responsible. Part of the burden of this message is to admonish you both on our attitude towards, approach to and activity of worship.

Their Despising of God Expressed (v.7-14)

God enumerates all that Israel is doing which is clear evidence of how they have despised the Name of God. Here is a list of the specific charges. Their evil motivations and the accompanying fruits point to a people who simply have disdained the true worship of God.

Dishonoring the Greatness of our Father (v.7-11)

They had become carnal in their worship.

Their Failure in Worship (v.7-8)

They had stooped to bringing the lame and the sick as sacrifices when they came to worship God. Their disobedience to God's clear instruction to bring the first, best, the most valued showed how little they valued God. They were doing what God commanded in wrong ways.

God's Response to their Worship (v.9-10)

God's response is defined in two graphic images.

- I will not receive you. God challenged them to take the offerings they were bringing to God to their earthly governors and

see if they would be pleased with it. Why should they expect God to receive them kindly?

- I am not pleased with you. I do not want you to even come to worship. Your offerings of worship are useless, a stench to me.

The Correction of their Worship (v.11)

That God is so great and majestic makes this dishonorable worship so abhorrent. God's Name will be great among the nations; why is it not great among His own people. This statement is:

- Prophecy to them
- Heritage for us

Is it true of us?

Disrespecting the Greatness of our King (v.12-14)

They had become careless in their worship.

Their Approach to Worship (v.12-13a)

They “disdainfully sniffed” at the worship of God. They saw it as a tiresome, wearisome and frankly, useless exercise nevertheless required by God. So they came but not expecting to reflect on and respond to the majesty and nearness of God.

They had defiled the worship—brought it down from what it was supposed to be—now they disdain it, do not value it, for the very stains they have put on it.

God's Response to their Worship (v.13b)

Again, two short pithy sentences express God's response.

- I will not receive your offerings of worship.
- I will curse you. This ought to frighten us and cause us to seriously and soberly think deeply about our own worship.

The Correction of their Worship (v.14)

God is a KING, a GREAT ONE. It is difficult for us to feel the impact of this. After all, we have Presidents who we pick and who will only be there for only 8 years. The greatness of God if nothing else, means HE IS NOT GOING AWAY. He will not be dismissed.

Again, His Name is feared among the Gentiles while being disrespected among His own people. The very Name God uses in this passage points to the terrible crime of dishonoring and disrespecting the Lord of Hosts (Malachi 1:6,8,9,11,13,14). What Malachi wants us to see is that God has infinite authority in the universe. He can wield all

the hosts of heaven. He has myriads of mighty flaming angels at His disposal, and they do His bidding flawlessly, never failing at their errands and unceasing in their adoring praise. He holds each star in anchor in the sea of space—all trillion, trillion of them—calling them each by name. He is the Lord of Hosts—hosts of armies, angels and stars.

God is the majestic God of adoring hosts in heaven following in His train. How can we possibly dishonor and disrespect Him?

Our Despising of God Examined

We need to think deeply about this because the outward form of how we dishonor and disrespect God is different. No one came in this morning bringing with you a blemished lamb, or a dove with a broken wing, or moldy bread to offer in worship. But the burden of the Word of the Lord this morning is to expose our own failure in worship.

Root of Dishonoring God

Failure to magnify the Greatness of God

As Father - The Call for Honor

Why we do not appreciate the force of this. We no longer expect that a father is to be honored. The modern ideal of a father whose leadership, authority, wisdom and strength wins the respect, reverence and deference of his children is largely lost. We have been so intent on correcting the sinful abuse of the age that we scarcely can recognize the central Biblical dimension of fatherhood implied in the fifth commandment, “Honor your father.” (Which also implies that we will to be the kind of father which calls forth from your children not only loving affection, but also a deferential respect and honor.) Thomas Watson, writing 300 years ago commended a “reverential esteem” as the Biblical fulfillment of all its texts relating to fatherhood. Such an idea is met with almost universal disdain today.

Today we expect to respond in affection and tenderness when what God wants first is honor and obedience. The clear teaching of this verse is the majestic fatherhood of God implies a sacred duty—that His children should honor Him and respect Him and pay Him reverential esteem.

As Master - The Call for Respect

We do not appreciate the force of this. We no longer expect that we should be respectful of our employers and our rulers. We are so democratic in all our notions of government that we cannot conceive of a Master who is not going away in 8 years. And that we would have a ruler so sovereign that He demands absolute and unquestioning alle-

giance because this brings to Himself glory and His Son rubs our sense of self-worth and respect raw.

Psalm 25:14 “The secret [intimate friendship] of the Lord is for those who fear Him...”

Now we can disclaim away the fear of the Lord by saying that God is not interested in a craven, crumbling cowering. But we must not then not fear Him—we must respect and feel a deep sense of wondering dread, of bold brokenness, of reverential relaxation, of fearing familiarity, of trembling tenderness, of affectionate awe. These two things given to us in Psalm 25:14 drive worship. The higher, more awesome, more transcendent, more majestic God is in tension with a bold, confident, “Papa, Father” approach. Just as we might hold a rubber band between our hands—the further apart the wider the stretch, the tighter the tension—so our the intensity of our worship is stretched by holding in one hand a transcendent God dwelling in light unapproachable and in the other hand coming by the Spirit to say “Papa”.

Results of Dishonoring God

The outward elements of God-honoring worship are those underwritten and given to us in the Scripture.

Prayer God centered and worshipping prayer where we linger adoringly and longingly in His Presence.

Singing Praise to God in one another’s presence from a soul filled with the Spirit and a mind filled with the Word (Ephesians 5:18-20; Colossians 3:16)

Worship Thinking through in our minds truth about God so that our consciences are afflicted and our souls are enraptured.

Preaching Expository exultation as the music of the mortified soul of the Preacher rings out the words of the text so that God is magnified, Christ is exhibited, God’s people are edified and sinners are convicted.

Even to the basic form of our simple, unadorned worship. We strive for both simplicity and beauty. Consider Nehemiah 8:1-8 as a pattern for gathered worship around the Word.

We do what God does not command. We have consciously worked to remove all elements of worship that are not regulated by the Word. There will not be much that caters to the flesh.

Do we so magnify the greatness of God so that we honor and fear God?

Carnal Worship

Let me show you symptoms that we really do not honor God.

- Lack of spiritual and mental preparation for worship. Do you do any more in coming before the Sovereign Lord of the universe than you do to go to a family reunion or PTA meeting?
- Lack of passionate involvement in worship.
 - We do not praise God in singing;
 - We do not obey God in giving;
 - We do not hear God in preaching.
- Lack of penitent response to worship. We hear and simply dismiss the TRUTHS as irrelevant. We never stop to confess our sins, to experience the sorrow of the cross or the joy of the gospel. We are frankly more worried about stuffing our faces than feeding our souls.
 - Some want experience without truth—emotionalism
 - Some want truth without experience—intellectualism
 - Some want guidance without grace—mysticism
 - Some want grace without guidance—individualism
 - Some want application without exposition—pragmatism
 - Some want exposition without application—orthodoxism.

We must have truth that leads to, shapes and interprets experience; and we must have truth that gives birth to experience.

Careless Worship

The essence of careless worship is worthless religious activity. What are some symptoms that we really do not fear and reverence God?

- We see church as part of a weekly routine which frankly is sometimes tiresome and we can take it or leave it;
- We criticize the church as flawed (which it certainly is since sinners come here) when we are adding to its flaws and are little interested in working at resolving its problems.
- We do not come with such an attitude and behavior to deal with our sinful tendency to careless and casual worship:

If God were here in a visible, Shekeniah glory cloud, would you enter this room of worship the way you do?

Is talking and moving about during offering demonstrating that we are not worshipping the Lord in our offerings?

Do we help our children to both feel the pressure of the awesomeness of God? Frankly, our children play, our teens slouch and write notes to one another, adults often are somewhere else mentally and emotionally.

Reasons for Dishonoring God

Tender affections are not sufficient to sustain and purify a life of grandeur. It is not first what we feel about God, but what we think about God. We go to the citadel of the soul through the gateway of the mind. That is why worship is first cognitive, reasoning, thoughts, truths before it is emotive.

My beloved, when God is not great to us, then the world is. We become bored with God and excited by the world.

Responses to Dishonoring God (by God)

God says to us “I am not pleased with you.”

- I will not receive you
- I will not meet with you.
- I will not accept your offering (worship).
- I will curse you in your worship.

Remedies to Dishonoring God

There are no techniques. The things that I have pointed out this morning are evidences of a deep malady. We simply do not think God is GREAT. He may be a lion, but He is a tame one. He may be a King, but He is a friendly one.

True worship comes from a heart where God is treasured above all human property and praise, and it aims to express the feeling of God’s true value and greatness by a spiritual sense of God’s immense worth.

So we must simply repent. We must change our minds about the greatness of God in such a way that we change our behavior in the Presence of such a magnificent God. If we do not or we cannot, we are lost. We can either be consumed by a passion for God or consumed by the wrath of God.

Closing

Honor the greatness of our magnificent Father.

Respect the Greatness of our majestic King.

May the Lord teach us to worship. May the Lord open our eyes to His greatness. May He forbid that we offer Him, in the pulpit, in the music, in the instruments, in the pew the leftovers of our lives. For from the rising of the sun to its setting - HIS NAME WILL BE GREAT.

Notes

Give Me Honor, My Messengers

Malachi 2:1-9

Introduction

Malachi calls on the people to take God seriously. The Lord must be recognized as He defines Himself. His people must stop treating Him lightly, an attitude which is often a consequence of having defined Him on our own terms. The prophet's concern is that his people might regain a proper reverence for God, a reverence that magnifies the worth of God.

Outline

- The Profanation of the Priestly Ministry (v.1-4)
- The Privileges of the Priestly Ministry (v.5-7)
- The Problems of the Priestly Ministry (v.8-9)

Relevance

This portion of Malachi's burden is addressed to the priests. So that causes us to ask a question, "How does this relate to us today? What kind of connections do we make to the Old Testament priesthood?" In the New Covenant, the priesthood resides solely in Christ and then in all His people. There is no priestly class. Instead, the church is a "holy priesthood" (1 Peter 2:5), a "royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9) and a "kingdom of priests to His God and Father" (Rev. 1:6;5:10;20:6).

This is one of the great failures of Roman Catholicism. It interposes between God and His people men who claim to remit their sins, to sacrifice in the mass the real body and blood of Christ, and to unquestionably interpret God's Word. And many evangelical churches do little better. But know this—wherever you find today an emphasis on the priesthood of the clergy you also find a minimizing and a distorting of the once-for-all sacrifice of Christ. You will find an elevating of the value and worth of man and a lowering of the supremacy and sufficiency of Christ.

So then, how are we to connect what the priests did and what we are to do today? Simply this, the Old Testament priests were responsible to communicate the truth of God to the people of God. And this function has been given to the church in her elders. God imparted through His Spirit public ministry gifts to men and then sovereignly gave those men to the church to equip the saints for their work of ministry. These overseers are to be able to teach (1 Tim.3:2) and that some elders are to labor solely in preaching and teaching (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:9). Ordination then is not an act of the church delegating to the elder its own inherent authority, but Christ conferring office through an act of the church acknowledging God's gift of the elder to the church.

Elders now do not offer sacrifices, rather we in our teaching and preaching are to point backward to the supremely sufficient sacrifice

of Christ, upward to the magnificent majesty of the risen Christ, inward to the indwelling wonder of the Spirit of Christ, and forward to the hope of the glory of Christ. So, Malachi 2 is very relevant to us because the root of priestly failure and the results of priestly faithfulness is very evident in ministerial failure and faithfulness.

Now, why should you be interested in this? Why should you who are not elders be concerned about the failures and faithfulness of elders?

- You will need (and in the very short future, we pray) to ordain more men to the eldership here. We need to continue to develop and articulate and implement the Biblical vision for church leadership and governance.
- You should be praying daily for the elders of your church. But you cannot pray with confidence and power if you do not know the pitfalls, perspectives and purposes for Biblical elders.
- You should hold your elders accountable to fulfill the Biblical vision of pastoral ministry. But you will fail in that by not knowing what the elders authorities and duties are.
- We are greatly encouraged when you respond with Biblical understanding to our ministry—when there is a deeply shared vision between the elders and the people for God-centered ministry.
- Finally, we ought to be interested in this simply because there is so much ministerial failure today.

We tend to focus on the moral aspects of their failure. Churches today are being swamped by the adulteries, marital failures and financial misdeeds of her ministers.

But God has an ever greater concern—ones that we too often do not hold in the same priority.

Warning of Ministerial Futility

God begins by warning His ministers what He will do. He is arresting their attention with graphic language as to what the consequences are going to be for their failure in ministry.

That these are so evident among us today is both a caution for us and a comfort to us. It is a caution for we must take care to our own ministries. It is a comfort for we know that the Lord of the church is moving among the candlesticks to give to the over comers their reward.

Our Blessings Will Become Curses

(v.2)

The very blessings of God will turn into curses on their ministries. We will be like the Israelites in whose mouth the manna became sour and

the flesh of the pigeons became poison. Think of some of the blessings of our day which have become a curse to the church:

- We worship in great comfort so we think that's the way Christianity ought to be.
- We have great privileges so we think God owes us.
- We have immense freedom to come and go, so we usually go often do not come.
- We are able to change our church at the least whim, and often do.
- We are encouraged to think well of ourselves, so we do not see how God could not.

And so on, ad nauseum. It may well be that most of what we glory in as the strengths and blessings of modern Christianity are in reality merely the curses of modernity.

Our Efforts Will Become Censured (v.3a)

The word offspring here may refer to seed. No matter what the exegetical detail may be, the implication is clear. The long term efforts at ministry will come under the censure and rebuke of God. This may mean that the seed sown will not take root, grow branches nor bear fruit. It may mean that the ministry will not continue with power and unction in the next generation. Or, most frightening of all, our children will come under the rebuke and censure of God because we have failed in ministry. May God deliver us and our little ones.

Our Ministries Will Become Offensive (v.3b,9b)

God is going to take the offal, the dung, the bloody stinking intestines from gutting the sacrificial animals and smear it on the faces of the priests. What God wants here is for us to feel as He does towards these ministries. He wants us to be revolted, sickened by it. The word may be used to refer to vomit. And how that evokes God response to the luke-warmness of the church.

Our Positions Will Become Empty (v.3c)

Do you see the passive voice? It is not that they will leave on their own volition. No. God intervenes to take them away. Elaboration on this point would be mere speculation. We know what it meant for these priests. It meant the coming of the Great High Priest, the Lord Jesus. The Old Testament priesthood and its utter failure was taken away in the sacrificial death and mediatorial work of Christ. Can we not hope that in the midst of deep failure that Christ will come to His people and intercede for them?



What has made God so angry? This is no cool, dispassionate dealing with disobedience. There is nothing so terrible to conceive than to have the beauty of holiness turn against you with omnipotent power and become the rage of God. Why is this so? What would turn God so against them?

Curse of Ministerial Failure

God calls the failure of leadership among His a people, a curse. It is a curse to the people and will be cursed in the end, by God Himself.

Characteristics of a Failed Ministry

Dotting the landscape of this text are the features that give shape to ministerial failure.

No Ear for God's Voice

(v.2a)

One great danger to pastoral ministry is that the voice of God in Scripture may be drowned out by other voices. One of the most frightening things in the ministry is the possibility that we may one day wake up to read the sacred page and hear nothing from God. We cannot herald what we have not heard.

No Passion for God's Glory

(v.2b)

The issue here is not merely whether the glory of God is the explicit unifying theme of the elder's doctrine and preaching, but whether there lies on his heart a burden to see God glorified. The congregation must ask of its pastors, "Is the glory of God not only a part of his theology but also the passion of his soul?" Does the glory of God come before the approval and praise of his people? Does it come before advancement and acclaim? Does it come before financial reward and material comfort?

Does the heart and concern of your elders come back again and again, like the needle of a compass points toward the magnet of truth? Is his heart aflame with a passion for God that makes his praying, his preaching, his studying, his counseling, his living burn with Godward truth?

No Regard for God's Ways

(v.8a, 9b)

They have fallen short of the standards of truth they were supposed to be proclaiming. They have not cultivated personal holiness. God's condemnation goes beyond the actions of sin and disobedience—it points to the attitude behind it. They have no regard for God's ways—for the way God is.

No Respect for God's Covenant**(v.5,8c)**

The priests held their office by Divine Covenant; so do elders. In their ordination the church affirms God's gift in them and their gift of them to the church. This is a solemn Covenant of pastoral office. John Owen has shown that office in the Scripture always involves authority and duty. Now too many elders (pastors) like the authority, but fail in the duty. And too many congregations affirm the duties while denying the authority.

Too many elders (pastors) void their covenants with their people by not heeding the commands of God, not hearing the voice of God, not proclaiming the Word of God and not overseeing the church of God. Many elders (pastors) corrupt their covenants with their people by commanding where God has not, lording instead of shepherding, driving instead of leading, defiling instead of edifying their people.

No Integrity in God's Word**(v.9)**

They have shown partiality in teaching God's Word. They have paid more attention to how the congregation is going to respond to the message than to whether God has approved the message. They have an eye on the attendance chart and the financial graphs. They have become good at tickling ears, confirming categories and never ever wielding the edge of the sword of the Word of God so that it divides the marrow and bones of their congregations.

The Consequence of a Failed Ministry**(v.8b)**

The horrible consequence of ministerial failure is expressed in these fatal words, you have caused many to stumble. It is a grief to godly ministers to watch the stumbling, faltering steps of a people afflicted by a failing ministry. How many of you have spent the last few years unlearning and relearning even some of the basics. We must remember that what we teach causes people to think certain ways which eventually causes them to live certain ways. This is what makes ministerial failure so grievous—the evil is compounded by the weight of public responsibility that should have restrained it.

To the Victims

Now we need to say something to some who have been the victims of ministerial failures, as many of you are. There has been so much hypocrisy, deception, manipulation and evil that you find it hard to hear, to trust, to heed, to submit to godly elders. You have stamped a big question mark on the reality and authority of Biblical leadership and have put all kinds of fences around yourself to protect yourself from this ever happening again. God has something to say to you in this text:

- God hates this kind of ministry infinitely more than you ever could. He intends to smear dung on the face of every elder or pas-

tor who forsakes the glory of God, departs from the ways of God, corrupts the teaching of the Word of God and causes stumbling among the people of God.

- God will deal with this kind of ministry. Not you. If you have pursued the Biblical process for dealing with a failed ministry and have not seen God bring about the visible correction, then you must leave it up to His secret providences to bring about that which will leave the face covered in dung, the ministry despised and his name denounced. Vengeance is MINE, says the Lord. Let Him repay. Don't let them drag you down with them into destruction.



In contrast, God wants us to see what the ministry ought to be.

Glory of Ministerial Faithfulness

Not all is so bleak. For God in His mercy and grace gives glory to faithful ministries. That is, just as His glory is the magnification of His own worth and value, so God magnifies the worth and value of godly leadership in the elders.

Characteristics of a Faithful Ministry

What emerges from the characteristics of a faithful ministry is a vision for a Biblical eldership. This must be shared by the pastors and the congregation for it is the Word of God. It must not be seen as unapproachable for we are able only by the enabling of God's grace and the believing of God's promises.

These are what you expect, towards which you pray, and in which we rejoice as truly God glorifying ministry. It is this sort of ministry which magnifies the worth and value of God and brings gladness to His people.

Reverence for God's Glory

(v.5)

Exaltation
The Root of the Ministry

This word must characterize the man of God. He must have a raging river of the glory and gladness of God running deep in his soul. I am coming to the conviction that without this, we will do little good. This reverence for God's glory will spill over in sparkling freshness in our living and preaching.

Faithfulness in ministry takes root when a man trembles in the presence of God, stands in awe of His Name and has a heart for His glory.

Teaches from God's Word

(v.6a)

Exposition
The Trunk of the Ministry

This word must characterize the preaching of the man of God. What he has to say must be manifestly evident in the Scriptures. All can see

that what he is saying is not his own word, but God's. Ministerial faithfulness is gauged by how he handles the Word. Pastoral ministry is responsible to feed God's sheep, to equip the saints for their work of ministry. This responsibility filters down through all the ministries of the church. For example: All of you who teach children and youth—are you teaching them the Bible? Is your lesson both from and saturated with the Scripture? Do they see you holding and teaching from your Bible? Or are we frankly just trying to get through 40 minutes with no major disturbance?

Faithfulness in ministry stands firm and strong as the tree trunk when a man honors and preaches the Book.

Walks in God's Ways

(v.6b)

Experience

The Branch of the Ministry

The faithful elder not only knows and teaches God's glorious ways from His Word, but he has learned by grace how to live them as well. There are two things pointed to here, "He walks with God in peace and uprightness." The experience of communion with God must be in piety and purity. He must have both peace with God and the peace of God that comes from a holy lifestyle. We demand much from our elders—we must have men who are holy in their whole manner of living.

Faithfulness in ministry branches outward from the trunk of the Word of God when a man walks with God in piety and purity.

Turns to God's Holiness

(v.6c)

Expectation

The Fruit of the Ministry

Here the contrast between a failed and a faithful ministry is most evident. A ministry may destroy or it may save. Instead of causing many to stumble, he turns many from iniquity. The faithful elder is one who becomes such a means of grace in his ministry that people turn away from sin to holiness.

Faithfulness in ministry bears fruit when a man exposes sin, makes it odious to the saints and so causes them by grace to turn from their sin.



When ministry is rooted in the glory of God and the trunk is strong in the Word of God and the branches display the righteousness of God, then the fruit is going to be the salvation of God for the sake of sinners.

Causes of a Faithful Ministry

(v.7)

What then drives a faithful ministry and minister?

The Preservation of Biblical Knowledge

We are guardians of the truth. We are not seen merely as searchers for truth. We have been given the apostolic deposit in a book. We must diligently study that book so as to understand, proclaim and defend the truths that are in it.

The Proclamation of Biblical Instruction

We must also be communicators of the truth. The godly elders whom God has given to you are to be the ones sought out for instruction.

What I say next, I say very carefully. It is my considered opinion (meaning I have given much to this) that the blessing of the wide availability of Christian radio, TV and even books and novels has become a curse on Christianity. You may today read or hear more heresy in one week than, for almost 2,000 years, most Christians would have heard in a life-time. I know there is a value in these things—that I am not denying. But many of the notions that have influence on your life and have become deep spiritual cancers are being fed by a steady diet of mildly heretical teaching in the so-called Christian media.

The Position of Biblical Ministers

Here is why there is both a great curse in ministerial failure and great glory in ministerial faithfulness—He is the messenger of the Lord of Hosts (v.7c). This is why we do not share, we proclaim. We are messengers. We are delivering, by God's grace, the message of the Word of God. And the message we are hearing from Malachi is that we must honor God—we must so value the worth and excellence of God that we are transformed into holy people who hear and heed the Word.

Conclusion

They Smell of Perfumed Assemblies

Here they come,
my nonchalants,
my lazy daisies,
their dainty perfume,
disturbing the room
the succulent smell
seductive as hell.

Here they are
my pampered flamboyants,
status spoiled, who bring
with exquisite zing
their souls spic and span
protected by Ban.

Their hearts young and gay
decked in handsome cliché,
exchanging at my call
with no effort at all
worship for whispering
God for gossiping,
theology for television.

Baptized in the smell
of classic Chanel
I promote their nod
to a jaunty God
Who, they are sure,
is a sparkling gem
superbly right for them.

There they go
my in-crowd
my soft-skinned crowd,
my suntanned, so-so
elegant, swellegant,
natty, delectable,
suave, cool, adorable,
DAMNED!

To this kind of Christianity the burden of the messenger of God is that we must embrace the greatness of God's electing love. We must magnify our majestic God. And the ministers of God must give Him honor.

Would you commit yourself to pray every day for your elders, that ours would be a glorious ministry? And pray that God would stir up in qualified men such a desire for eldership that we will sense the giving of that man to the church and affirm him.

Would you commit yourself to pray every day with me that the majestic glory of God, and the Word of God and the righteousness of God would so fill this church that people would receive the salvation of God and turn away from sin, right here and all over this city?

Notes

Honoring God in Covenant Living

Malachi 2:10-16

Introduction

One of the major curses of ministerial failure is that it causes God's people to stumble. One of the major blessings of ministerial faithfulness is that it turns people away from iniquity and sin. In the words of one writer, "When there is a famine of the Word of God the spiritual nutrients that enable the eye to spot sin as sin are gone. And the spiritual protein that gives the moral muscle of the soul the strength to do what is right is missing. The spiritual eyes become diseased through malnutrition, and the clear lines between sin and righteousness begin to blur. The moral muscle of the will atrophies and weakens so that we succumb to the weight of the world because there is no strength to stand against it." [John Piper]

We are not well taught about Covenant Community. We do not see ourselves as being brought into covenant union with God in Christ nor in covenant union with one another in the church. This hopefully will be corrected with further teaching in the years to come.

We have not well applied what we do know. In fact, we have rarely thought at all about what it means to be related to one another as the community of God. We tend to work at our relationships in isolation rather than in covenant union. We see purity as a matter of the individual's personal piety rather than in the Biblically communal sense.

My prayer this morning is that the whole range of Biblical truth and the whole range of human need will be brought together in such a way that God will transform us for His glory and our good.

We find many today afflicted with a disease called scoliosis—a severe curvature of the spine that sometimes renders the victim unable to stand or walk. To correct this, surgeons insert steel rods up the back to straighten the posture, relieve the pain and enable the person to stand. This is what we must do this morning. The Word of God in this text is like steel. If you are willing to receive it and if the spiritual surgery is properly performed, your life can be made more upright, you will be spared many pains, and your moral backbone will be greatly strengthened. Let's do this together. Prepare yourself for surgery and I will handle these words of steel as gently as I can. [Piper]

The Foundation of Covenant Faithfulness (v.10)

God is a covenant making and covenant keeping God. It is the one who cannot lie and who promised eternal life before creation who has made covenants, even within the Godhead. Redemptive history is simply the unfolding of each of God's covenants towards His purpose in the New Covenant that is mediated by Christ as High Priest and Sacrifice. For many, this idea of covenant being at the heart of God's dealing with man is familiar territory. For others, it will be new. So gird up your mind to follow quickly into new paths.

Explanation of Covenantal Principles

Malachi assumes a general knowledge that we often do not bring with us to this text. The center of this particular circumference of truth is simply this: God relates to man and man to God in covenant terms and expects that man will relate to one another on the same basis. That is to say, God made promises, agreements and commitments that He will fulfill. He will implement the blessing or the curse of that covenant. Man is to relate to one another within the framework of covenants or promise-keeping as well.

Covenant Living in the Larger Community under God

Through the second question, "Has not one God created us?", Malachi is drawing attention to the necessity to live in covenantal order in our communities. We are all created by God who has determined how we are to relate to one another. All relationships within our communities, our cities, our states, our nation, our world are ordered on covenants. These covenants are most often than not written as laws, treaties and contracts. It is fundamental to any ordered society that we relate to one another by some sort of expected behavior. These behaviors are generally outlined by our laws and cultural norms—our covenants.

Covenant Living in the Community of God

The loss of this concept is directly attributable to Dispensationalism.

In the first question, "Do we not all have one Father?", Malachi stresses the covenant oneness of the people of God. It is a covenant oneness drawn from family. This points to an essential unity as the people of God. Again, we are greatly impoverished by the loss of this in our churches today. We do not think of ourselves as covenanting together and we do not see ourselves in the gathered church as a community of believers. As a result, the accountability and discipline of the New Testament is at some points quite shocking to us as when we read of the death of Ananias and Sapphira in Acts 5 having misrepresented their giving.

I believe that we need to think through once again the concept of a church covenant—not to bind us to extra-Biblical rules, but to establish a covenantal relationship within our church body. Such covenant making and keeping Biblically creates community in which the Scripture sown in the soil of accountability and discipline bears fruit in personal and public holiness.

Examination of Covenantal Purity

The third question introduces the word that, like some poisonous weed, grows up again and again. It is the Hebrew word, *bagad* -to deal treacherously, to break one's word. This word is used in the Old Testament only of those who are in covenant relationship. It points to the one breaking the covenant, their attitudes and actions that are treachery. The word should have the sound of the word traitor. It's New Testament equivalent would be faithlessness—an inability to be faithfully committed ones word and to ones relationships.

We are knit together, both in the larger community and in the church, in a moral order woven by keeping our promises, obeying our laws and being faithful in our relationships. This beautiful tapestry is unraveled in our faithlessness, our *bagad*, and what is left are the individual strands of private gratification.

Malachi's message could hardly be more relevant to us or more needed. He warns us five times not act treacherously, *bagad*. Or to put it positively, he urges us to make covenant-making and covenant-keeping the fabric of our life together.



That we need this exhortation is evident from what grows up from the root of covenant faithlessness—what is nurtured when the root of sin is not pruned in a covenant keeping community.

The Fruit of Covenant Faithlessness

(v.11-16)

Our unwillingness to acknowledge and to honor God as a covenant people is most easily illustrated in the fruit it bears in the covenant of marriage.

Dishonoring God in the Way We Enter Marriage (v.11-12)

What the men of Judah had done was to marry those who did not love or follow Jehovah. In bringing women who worshipped foreign gods into the community worship they had committed an abomination and had profaned the worship or holiness of God. That these are the facts of the case are witnessed to by Ezra and Nehemiah.

So the point of the verse is that when we claim to love God with all our heart and soul and mind and strength, and then willfully choose to unite ourselves with an unbeliever in the most intimate personal rela-

tionship on earth, we profane the holiness of God. We act as though our emotional drive for human intimacy is more important than affirming the preciousness of God's holiness and the value of HIS intimacy.

God delights in His own holiness so much that no human relationship must violate the standard of that love.

Now, do not hear more than what is meant here:

This text is not saying that it is impossible for an unbelieving spouse to be converted. 1 Peter 3 says that we must live in such a way as to make that possible.

This text is not saying that if you are married to an unbeliever that you should get out. 1 Corinthians 7 tells the New Covenant believers at Corinth not to draw the wrong conclusion but to stay married.

Rather this text says to each of you whose choice of a marriage partner is still ahead of you, to settle it in your mind and heart that no matter what, you will never marry anyone who does not love the Lord Jesus Christ with their whole heart, soul and mind. Do not violate the covenant between you and God and God's people by marrying someone who is not a Christian.

Listen to what Paul says about this in 2 Corinthians 6:14-7:1.

14 Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? 15 What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? 16 What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people."

17 "Therefore come out from them, and be separate, says the Lord. Touch no unclean thing, and I will receive you." 18 "I will be a Father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters, says the Lord Almighty."

1 Since we have these promises, dear friends, let us purify ourselves from everything that contaminates body and spirit, perfecting holiness out of reverence for God. (NIV)

This is not an optional thing. That God views this seriously is marked by the consequences. God says in effect that He will turn His back on one who knowingly goes into marital union with an unbeliever. Listen to the Word of God, especially you young people. Great will be the grief of disobedience and faithlessness. Great will be the glory of covenant-keeping with God.

Dishonoring God in the Way We End Marriage (v.13-16)

Enter into the place of worship and take to heart the scene verse 13 gives us. They have come to worship and God is not there for them. They weep and cry and groan because there is no sense of God's Presence even though they knew He was there. God had hidden Himself from their acts of worship. He would no longer receive their gifts nor acknowledge them. They could not understand why.

God has done this to get their attention, to cause them to so understand relating on a covenant basis that they would stop an evil that had infected their lives.

The second fruit of covenant faithlessness is in divorce. God expresses His hatred for divorce. Now why has divorce fanned the embers of God's holiness into wrath?

- *MARRIAGE IS COMPANIONSHIP.* God intended that marriage should complete both the spouses in providing companionship for both. This companionship was meant to illustrate God's entering into intimate fellowship with us in Christ.
- *MARRIAGE IS COVENANTAL.* Marriage is not built on the sand of emotional satisfaction but on the solid rock of covenant keeping. Emotions may come and go, physical beauty may wane, but marriage is a life-long commitment.
- *MARRIAGE IS CONSECRATED.* The union of man and woman at all levels bears the witness of God's approval. He entered in as a party to your marriage as the witness to its reality and sanctity. You have no right, as a believer, to sever that union except as God allows.
- *MARRIAGE IS CONCLUSIVE.* Marriage is meant to put closure on many things. It changes our relationship to our parents as we leave and cleave. It focuses our desire for and satisfaction in on our spouse.
- *MARRIAGE IS COMMUNICATIVE.* Marriage is ordained by God as an emblem, a representation of His relationship with the church. God has bestowed on marriage by His presence and purpose the dignity of being an image of His covenant with His bride, the church. Divorce deeply mars the beauty and reality of that picture.

Let me insert now some steel rods to give your moral backbone support. Let us nourish ourselves in such a way as to sustain the Biblical vision for marriage.

- *COMMIT YOURSELF TO FAITHFULNESS.* Remember that you are promised into your marriage. No matter what, you will do all that you can to stay faithful to those vows. Your commitment will strengthen your resolve when emotions come and go, when temptations entice, and when thorns afflict the bed of roses. You have chosen your love, now love your choice.
- *GUARD YOUR HEART.* Notice the references to take heed to your spirit. You must carefully guard against anything or anyone who would draw your heart away from covenant-keeping with your spouse. You must be alert to any activity or individual who is a danger to your marriage. Those who live in the tropics learn quickly to carefully shake out their shoes every morning before putting them on. Scorpions may have crawled into their warmth in the night hours. So you must often shake out the shoes of your life lest there arise that which is poisonous to your marriage.
- *CULTIVATE A BIBLICAL RELATIONSHIP TO YOUR SPOUSE.* Glean through all the one another texts of the New Testament. Treat your spouse with just the simple Christian courtesy commanded by the Scripture. Work at speaking the truth lovingly. Be kind. Be tenderhearted, forgiving. Pour the same time and energy into caring for them as you do for yourself. Repent of your selfishness, self-centeredness, hatefulness, laziness, lovelessness. Many of you need to put aside all the books you have been reading to try to have a wonderful, happy, fulfilling marriage. You need to read and study the Scripture over and over and over again to receive the grace to have a godly, holy and satisfying marriage.
- *EMULATE THE BIBLICAL MODEL OF MARRIAGE, CHRIST AND THE CHURCH.* Does your marriage look like the relationship between Christ and the church? Are you giving yourself sacrificially? Are you striving to present your spouse before God as holy and without blame? Is your marriage characterized by the love Christ has for us and the submission we ought to have to Him? Do you study the model of marriage in Christ and the church and pattern yours after it?
- *MAKE CHRIST THE CENTER OF YOUR HOME.* This is not just Christian sloganeering. There are too many things around which our marriages revolve. For many, sex is the center of their marriage. For others, children. For some, sports and entertainment. For others, it is the prestige and position we have which drive our marriages. Now everything has its place—but nothing can be at the center. Christ Himself must be the all satisfying marrow which

flavors all the joys and privileges of our marriages.

The force of the warning is that we must take heed to our spirit. It is the way we think worked out in actions, behaviors and ways of living that lead to divorce. So we must have God's attitude towards it—we must hate it. For God has never and will never nullify His marriage to the elect. Christ will never forsake His bride, the church. He is a Covenant-Maker and a Covenant-Keeper. That is what marriage means. That is what make your marriage significant.

Conclusions

We must return to an understanding of our churches and marriages as covenant-making and covenant-keeping. The solemn warnings that are attended to covenant-breaking and unfaithfulness will only be effective if we truly value our fellowship with God.

I invite you to think deeply about marriage. If it is still in your future, to establish a Biblical vision of marriage and be committed to it no matter what the emotional or physical drives of the moment. If you are married, keep your covenant, maintain your companionship, cultivate your relationship, weed out that which diverts you from a holy purity in your marriage.

A Christian home is a place where sinners live. But as Christians, we admit that we sin, we know what to do about our sins, and we seek to progress out of our sin. (Adams) If we do not, the downward spiral will end in the spiritual disaster of divorce.

Think of divorce as God sees it—as loathsome, sinful and unworthy of Christians.

If you have gone through a divorce—do not become discouraged with this message. I am strengthening current marriages against what could and too often does happen. This is not the whole counsel of God as it relates to marriage and divorce. But it is still the Word of God.

Keep your covenants, your promises, your word. Do not marry an unbeliever. Do not divorce the spouse of your covenant. In this, honor God.

Notes

The Pleasure of God in Refining Us

Malachi 2:17-3:6

Introduction

When I was a teen, my parents took us to visit the Blenko Glass Works. There they still hand blow some of the most beautiful works of glass imaginable. The display shelves and counters were filled with glass creations in marvelous colors and wonderful shapes. Some were varicolored; others had gold or silver threads running like bright streams across their surfaces. We then were guided into the smelting works themselves. There the sand was heated into molten glass, the white-hot fires separating and vaporizing the impurities. The glass blower would dip the end of his wand into the vat of molten glass. He kept it constantly turning, blowing into the end and shaping with instruments chosen to pinch, mold, and shave. As he worked, when it cooled to where he was meeting resistance, he thrust it back into the roaring furnace, slowly turning to evenly heat it till a condition to be worked again was reached.

Occasionally, the artisan would see some flaw that would require totally melting the work down to start over. Sometimes, there would be some impurity in the molten glass. Those pieces were taken to a barrel and then the glass shattered into them. Those shards were gathered up and taken to be put to different use. But the amazing, never-to-be-forgotten thing in all this was the furnace.

The Scripture sometimes focuses on the clay and at others on the potter. Sometimes on us, sometimes on God. But in this text, the furnace, the fire is highlighted. The central message of this portion of the burden of Malachi is that, we are to honor God in His pleasure to be a refining fire.

The Cause for the Refining Work

(v.17)

What is it that calls forth this amazing insight, this awesome revelation into the character of God? We have wearied God.

Their Attitude Evaluated

We have wearied God? Now how can that be? How can the one who formed all things by the Word of His power be weary? How can the one who upholds all the whirling universes on the ocean of space, be tired? How can the mighty weaver of each thread of the tapestry of time, be faint? How can the Sovereign shaper of each vessel of clay, be weary? What mighty doom awaits the cosmos of heavens and ga-

lactic systems, of angels and men, when God's back is bowed? What great burden, what great weight has He borne?

He has borne the weight of our words. Now I know that we do not think today that words are significant or weighty. And I know that in the absolute sense, our words cannot strain God's capacity to bear them. But God wants us to see in an understanding way that the attitudes these words exhibit weary Him. So they ought therefore to shame us.

Their Attitude Exposed

Now God uncovers the attitudes that were clothed in words. They had dishonored God by leveling two accusations. These accusations were like icebergs where the real danger is hidden under the surface.

Their Wrong View of God's Pleasure

In their view, God was accepting as good those who did evil. They accused God of delighting in those who sin. Now what does this mean?

What the Israelites were struggling with is that they had just endured 70 years of captivity under the yoke of a wicked nation. Now they returned to the land and all around them were people living in greater wickedness than they could have imagined. They saw the wicked prospering and thought that God was ignoring their evil and in fact, had begun to enjoy the wicked. The blasphemy of such thinking is so hard to believe in others and so easy to allow in ourselves.

Their Impatient Demand of God's Punishment

They expected God's justice to be fully exhibited and exercised now. God claims to be a God for whom justice is not only what He does but what He is. So where is He? The wickedness around them was very evident to them while the God of justice was absent.

We are like this too. We watch the spiraling decay into pagan depravity around us. We see the terrible sins of abortion and homosexuality accepted and encouraged as the correct thing. And even in evangelical circles, abortion is seen merely an undesirable, but acceptable option. Some evangelicals have begun to accept homosexuality as an alternate lifestyle and homosexuals into their pulpits. And we want to cry out, "Where is the God of justice? Why does He not act?"

Here is what wearies God. We were too focused on the evils around us and too comfortable with the sins in us.



"Behold, see, pay attention to this", God says. Justice is going to come in the form of a person, a messenger— in fact, two messengers. Where is the God of justice? The finger of prophecy points to the One to come.

The Coming of the Refining Work (v.1-2)

What was a prophetic promise for the nation of Israel has now become a purifying privilege for us.

The Promise of a Refiner to Come

God promises to send messengers. Into the need for justice come those who have a message. They are revealing God in their character, conduct and communication. One will come to prepare the way. This one came in the spirit and power of Elijah. We know him as John the Baptist (Like 1:17). He is the one who prepares the way.

The Person of the Refiner to Come

But who is this messenger of the covenant? It is the Lord Jesus Christ. That this is so is evidenced by:

The one who comes is the Lord sought by Israel. He is sent by God as God.

When He comes, He comes to the Temple that He owns. He is styled as the One who owns the Temple to which He comes.

He is the messenger (possibly, angel) of God's Covenant. He is the mediator, the representative, the testator, the communicator, the purchaser of God's Covenant.

He is the One whom Israel desired and delighted in anticipation. He is the coming King, the Messiah. He was the one that hungry hearts waited with great anticipation for His appearing.

Then I can but conclude that this is none other than the Son of God, who is with God and is God (John 1:1) and who came into the world, came unto His own and made Himself known to us personally in Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

The Problem when the Refiner Comes

But the coming of Christ to Israel was not at all what they expected or wanted. They wanted someone to deliver them from the tyranny of others. They wanted someone to be their King. They wanted someone who would subdue their enemies. They wanted someone who would bring them honor and recognition.

What Jesus did when He came was to deliver from the tyranny of sin, who as King would subdue them. He humbled himself in order to bring honor and recognition to Himself. But that is not all the problem.

Why can they not stand at His coming? Why can they not endure? Because when He comes it will be and was as a refining fire.

What God's questions reveal is why He comes as He does. We have a need to be refined. We were created in the image of God with the potential to reverence God and trust Him and obey him and glorify Him. But we are born in sin, conceived in iniquity. We are saturated, like a sponge, with sin in rebellion and unbelief. We fall short of the glory of God, again and again and again.

Now we can prove this from Scripture by appealing to a host of texts. But the sharp edge of your sinfulness cuts your conscience when it is noticed how easily your heart inclines to those things that will show your strengths to others and how resistant your heart is to communion with God in solitude.

The Conditions under the Refining Work (v.3-4)

What is it like to be under the refining work of God?

The Purification of His People (v.3a)

This refining work is a purifying fire. Its bright flames and melting heat are designed to deal with the dross, the impurities in our lives.

I must say this to you that there is no painless path to heaven. Why is this so? Because Jesus said that the pure in heart shall see God. And it is no more possible to be pure without pain than it is to be refined without fire. The fire of our refining has two forms:

The Fire of Affliction.

This is the purifying affect of the afflictions that God brings into our lives by His design and in His mercy.

1 Peter 1:6-7

In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. 7 These have come so that your faith—of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire—may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed.

James 1:2-4

2 Consider it pure joy, my brothers, whenever you face trials of many kinds, 3 because you know that the testing of your faith develops perseverance. 4 Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature and complete, not lacking anything.

Hebrews 12:5-10,14

4 In your struggle against sin, you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. 5 And you have forgotten that word of encouragement that addresses you as sons: "My son, do not make light of the Lord's discipline, and do not lose heart when he rebukes you, 6 because the Lord disciplines those he loves, and he punishes everyone he accepts as a son." 7 Endure hardship as discipline; God is treating you as sons. For what son is not disciplined by his father? 8 If you are not disciplined (and everyone undergoes discipline), then you are

illegitimate children and not true sons.... God disciplines us for our good, that we may share in his holiness. 11 No discipline seems pleasant at the time, but painful. Later on, however, it produces a harvest of righteousness and peace for those who have been trained by it. ... be holy; without holiness no one will see the Lord.

The Fire of Self-denial

This is the purifying effect of recognizing the indwelling remnants of sin in us and dealing with it in self-denial.

Matthew 5:29-30

29 If your right eye causes you to sin, gouge it out and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to be thrown into hell. 30 And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to lose one part of your body than for your whole body to go into hell.

1 Corinthians 9:27

27 No, I beat my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize.

Romans 8:12-14

12 Therefore, brothers, we have an obligation—but it is not to the sinful nature, to live according to it. 13 For if you live according to the sinful nature, you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the misdeeds of the body, you will live, 14 because those who are led by the Spirit of God are sons of God.

In other words, besides the affliction that comes our way to refine our faith and burn up worldly reliances, there should also be an intentional fiery warfare against indwelling sin. For the path to holiness, heavenliness and happiness is marked by this truth: no pain, no gain.

The Presentation by His People

(v.3b)

Malachi's message to Israel is that God would refine His people through the messenger of the covenant so that they may come to worship (bring their offerings) based on righteousness (that of another).

So how are we as New Covenant Christians supposed to hear this text? What is the point of all this purifying work for us? And there had better be a good reason because we in this day are not too thrilled to hear that the way to heaven's glories and treasures is through the smelting work of fiery furnaces.

The purpose of all this refining work is that we might so live in holiness as to glorify God and enjoy Him. That is, that we might live lives whose righteousness is a sacrifice that magnifies the worth of God and whose reward is a worship that takes delight in and is satisfied with God for Himself.

The Pleasure in His People

(v.4)

God longed to be pleased with His people. Take the yearnings in the hearts of you parents to see your children do well and infinitely magnify that, in fact, zoom the lens of that onto the cross, and you will have some sense of the pleasure of God in His people.

Think of a silver smith. He selects the raw materials having in mind a design for the work. He begins to heat it in the flame, then mold and shape and hammer so that the design emerges by the skill of the artisan. The more the piece takes the shape of his design, the more his joy increases till with beating heart, the final product shines brightly on the velvet. And all who see the intricate work of the master's hand and know the fire through which it was wrought, wonder at his skill and praise him. And in that praise, his joy in the piece increases.

So it is with us. God, in infinite love and patience, places us in the fire of affliction and hammers us on the anvil of His will so as to produce a work whose design is like that of His Son. And the more we accept and admire and acclaim the skill of His work, the more His pleasure and joy in us is magnified.

The Contrast to the Refining Work

(v.5)

This verse makes clear that when God comes not everyone will be refined. Some will be consumed. Here the fire of God's holiness is fanned by His glory from that which refines into that which consumes. That fire which refines the gold and silver here consumes the plastic and the chaff for "Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. (Malachi 4:1).

- He draws near, not for fellowship, but for judgment.
- He moves swiftly to indict those in sin in our midst.

I understand the final portion of this verse to tell us why, even those who mix themselves with the people of God and claim to be the children of God can carry on in sin: they do not fear God.

Here were the people of God among whom could be named those who practiced the occult, committed adultery, lied continuously, and abused their power over others. It is not so different today. Church attenders read their horoscopes, fantasize about one another until it bears fruit in adultery, will lie to one another and about one another and cannot speak the truth when it is needed, and will use their positions, powers and prosperity to gain an advantage even over the helpless and the hopeless.

That these kind of people are not true believers is evident for they do not fear God. Romans 3:9-18 indicts them in the same kind of language, “We have already made the charge that Jews and Gentiles alike are all under sin. 10 As it is written: “There is no one righteous, not even one; 11 there is no one who understands, no one who seeks God. 12 All have turned away, they have together become worthless; there is no one who does good, not even one.” 13 “Their throats are open graves; their tongues practice deceit.” “The poison of vipers is on their lips.” 14 “Their mouths are full of cursing and bitterness.” 15 “Their feet are swift to shed blood; 16 ruin and misery mark their ways, 17 and the way of peace they do not know.” 18 “There is no fear of God before their eyes.”



So how can we be sure to experience this work of God as a refining fire now and not a consuming blaze later?

The answer cannot be: get rid of your own sin! That is wrong because then you would not then need the refining work and all God’s children are subject to that. But is mostly wrong because you really cannot do it. It takes the merciful fire of the purifying God to deal with your sin. So what can a person do to get that mercy?

The answer of the whole Bible is this: trust in the purifying mercy of God. Throw yourself helplessly upon God’s grace. Or, as Malachi puts it often: fear God by refusing to dishonor Him by unbelief.

The way to experience the fire of Christ as refining and not consuming is to trust His promise to bring us through the refining fire because He Himself has passed through the consuming fire on our behalf. Salvation is by grace through faith in the purifying mercy of God.

The Comfort during the Refining Work

(v.6)

“I do not change, therefore, you are not consumed.” Why does God tell us this? How do these words bring comfort and hope to us?

Because it tells us that God is a covenant keeping God. Christ has sealed the New Covenant with His life in His blood. He has an unswerving loyalty to His covenant which is sustained by the unchangeableness of His character. This covenant was established in God’s sovereign love (Malachi 1:1-6), was sealed by God’s saving love, is exhibited in God’s sanctifying love and will be glorified in His Son’s love.

We take comfort in the midst of the refining fire for we trust in the unchanging, purifying, covenant-keeping love of God for us.

Most great works of music have rising themes which climax in a soul stirring anthems. Then, the music will resolve and begin to work its way again to a complementary theme to reach again a great moment.

This text is like that as well. The opening dissonance gives way to terrible melody that peaks in this theme, “HE IS LIKE A REFINERS FIRE”. Then this music wends its way and rises again to the grand climax in the consoling theme, “I DO NOT CHANGE, SO YOU ARE NOT CONSUMED.”

When faced with fire we need to know that it is a refining fire, not a consuming blaze.

Conclusions

- The refining work of God is a fire—with all that that means. But it will never destroy His own, only purify them.
- Know this, that God will move one day and draw near to the church to cull out the tares, bind them together and cast them into everlasting flame. To you who are at ease in your sins, feel safe in your religion— you face, not the refining fire of a loving master, but the roaring furnace of a dishonored sovereign. Cast yourself on His mercy today. Do not sit and let another moment go by. If you feel not the weight of your guilt, ask God for a tender conscience. If you have been awakened to the terrors of hell, the awful prospect of the censure of God then turn to Him. Dishonor Him no more with your unbelief, your self-satisfaction, your hypocrisy. Be assured that all who call on Him will be saved, and saved from the consuming blaze to become partakers of the refining fire.
- Why are some of you not experiencing this refining work? Are you so consumed with the evil around you that you have become comfortable with the sin within you? Do you so value being a holy Christian that you would dare to step forward into the refining fire of self-denial?
- To you who may be experiencing the fire of affliction now. O, accept, admire and adore the loving hand that skillfully guides the work till in holiness and heavenliness you magnify the worth of God and are satisfied with God Himself. These are not mere words, great soul sustaining truths that have held up many a saint in the furnace.

The Ruinous Effect of Robbing God

Malachi 3:7-12

Introduction

Malachi's burden has been to expose how the people of God have dishonored God. They have failed to magnify God by:

- The questioning of His sovereignty in electing love
- The despising of His holiness in worship
- The failure of His ministers in the Word
- The faithlessness to His Covenant in marriage
- The faulting of His refining in purity

Now, Malachi accuses them of theft. And in these words, we may well stand liable to the same accusation.

I must say this to you:

- In the past many of you have been abused and beat-up over stewardship and giving. Just as discipline is a right and good thing, but can be (and in our day, often is) carried too far and become destructive rather than instructive and corrective, so also is preaching on giving. It is a good and right thing. The message of this text is not meant to abuse, but rather to instruct and correct.
- Many of you will reject what I say without giving the Word a hearing. You have your mind set. Loved ones, this ought not to be. As I understand this and many other texts, a significant number of you in our fellowship are simply experiencing the ruinous effects of robbing God in your finances. This sin, more than many others, creates a vicious cycle of ever increasing financial futility until it is reversed by an obedience motivated by faith.
- Some of you will hear this text with joy and affirmation. Be encouraged to continue that good work that you are now doing in giving your tithes and offerings to God in God's appointed place. May your tribe increase. May the spiritual harvest of the seed sown in financial faithfulness be great.

May God enable us by His grace to hear and to heed His warnings and encouragements from the Word.

Analysis - The Meaning of This Text

Briefly, let us examine this text to be sure of what it says and how the Israelites were to hear it.

The Charge against Israel (v.7-9)

This indictment accuses Israel of committing grand larceny against God. They were thieves. They, having received from God all that they owned, did not return to Him what they were required to. In turning away from the command of God, they had turned away from God Himself. Robbing God had the ruinous effect on Israel of distancing them from God.

The lesson is clear: Disobedience distances us from God.

The Command to Israel (v.10)

God clearly commands them to do what the statutes of Israel specified they must do. The force of the command is as an obligation. But it is framed in warnings and enticements to inform their faith and to draw out their obedience.

The Precept to Honor God

- *AN ACTION* - They were required to bring it in. The responsibility was on each family to fulfill their obligation.
- *AN AMOUNT* - The whole tithe was the 10% on their increase as well as the first-fruits of their children, livestock and harvest. It was a measurable, proportional amount directed toward specific obedience.
- *A LOCATION* - It was to be brought into God's house (the Temple) where storerooms had been built to hold all that was given. The charitable giving of the people of God (and much was commanded and encouraged) that was not brought to the house of God was not recognized as the tithe.



Nehemiah records how this was understood and implemented by the very people who heard this message. Read *Nehemiah 10:37-39*.

The Purpose in Honoring God

The tithe was given in order that there might be provision for the ministry of the house of God. That which was brought in was to sustain the priests, provide for the needs of the Temple facilities and to maintain the services and ministries of the house of the Lord. Nehemiah tells us that the commitment to do this was motivated by a desire not to neglect the house of the Lord. (Nehemiah 10:39)

The Pleasure in Honoring God

The grace of God is so evident here! God says: “I want to encourage you to try this. Test me out. Your obedience in this area, rather than impoverishing you, will cause me to open the windows of heaven and to pour out provision for you more than you need.” The obvious illusion here is to the giving of the manna in the wilderness. God provided on a daily basis all that they needed and in abundance. What emerges here is that God desired that they give with an eye to the command and a heart to the pleasure.

The Consequences for Israel (v.11-12)

Faithful, God honoring obedience calls forth blessing from God. It is His pleasure to respond to the promptings of the faith He gives us by gracing us with blessing.

The Blessing Described (v.11)

The sense here is that God would shield those families who obeyed God from the effects of the curse. God is not promising to send these awful disasters if they do not tithe, but is providing a deliverance from the natural effects of living in a sin cursed world. Their efforts at tilling the ground would be attended by special protection by God so that there would be an abundance of produce.

The Blessing Observed (v.12)

The effect on the people around them would be to see the lands of Israel as being a place of special delight. They would be glorious gardens, havens of great harvest, islands of bounteous blessing in the midst of a sin ravaged world.

But beyond this, the people would be a delightful land says El-Shaddai, the all-sufficient, all-satisfying One, the Almighty.

Application - The Message of This Text

How then are we to understand this text today? The essence of the questions is simply this: is tithing to God's appointed place the obligation of New Covenant believers?

The Responsibility to Tithe

That we have an obligation to tithe in faith by the grace of God is supported by the following lines of argument.

The tithe exists apart from the law Genesis 14:18-20; Hebrews 7:4-10

Abraham gave a tithe on all that he owned to Melchizedek, the priest of God. He seems to be acting in faith. The significance of this act is used by the author of Hebrews to show then that the Old Covenant

priests in the Aaronic order tithed in principle to Jesus Christ, the great High Priest in the Melchizedekian order as proof of the superiority of Christ.

We cannot therefore say that the tithe is limited to the Mosaic Law.

The people of God were commanded to tithe in the Law

Now at first, this seems to be a contradiction to what we have just said. Not at all. The strangest thing would have been to have Abraham tithing and then no appearance of tithing in the Law. But what we find is that Israel was to bring the tithe to the house of God.

I conclude that from Abraham through till Christ, there is a continuing principle of proportional giving accompanied by an increasing revelation as to the methods and motivations for it.

Jesus Christ never nullified the tithe.

In all the times that Jesus explains, expands and fulfills the Law, we never hear Him abolishing the tithe. He never says, “You have heard it said, bring all your tithes into the house of God, but I say to you, do whatever you think you can do.” On the contrary, in Luke 11:42 Jesus says “Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter (justice and love of God) without leaving the former undone (tithing).” In other words, you cannot use tithing as a cover for failing to love God and neighbor. But you must tithe as an aspect of loving God and one another.

Paul expects proportional giving enabled by grace.

In 1 Corinthians 16:2 Paul says, “On the first day of every week each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made.” In other words, proportionate giving is still the rule. You are to set aside a sum of money that is a proportion or a percent of your income and to bring it to church where it will be saved and spent for ministry use.

The Reasons to Tithe

Beyond the fact that the New Testament itself commands us to give, which ought to be sufficient, God graciously challenges us to give in the following principles.

The expectation of New Testament believers is to support the church by tithing.

The ministry in the New Testament has an even greater need than that in the Old for financial sustenance.

There is the responsibility to provide for its teaching and governing elders as Paul writes in Galatians 6:6 “Anyone who receives instruction in the Word must share all good things with his instructor” and in 1 Timothy 5:17-18, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the scripture says ‘Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain.’ And ‘the worker deserves his wages.’”

There is the responsibility to support the widows who have no family and the poor in the church according to 1 Timothy 5 and Romans 15:26. This is done by some method of systematic giving.

There is the responsibility to support the missionary enterprise of the church, beginning at home and extending abroad in Romans 15:24 and 1 Corinthians 9:7.

The exhortation for New Testament believers is to liberality, not limitation.

Paul’s discussion of the responsibility to support the benevolent effort on behalf of the church at Jerusalem revolves around liberality (2 Corinthians 8-9). We are not limited to tithing, but with tithing as a base, we are to be generous.

The example of New Testament believers shows great sacrifice in giving.

Paul draws on his experience of the sacrificial giving by the Macedonian churches in 2 Corinthians 8:1-5 as an example of what others ought to be doing. In their poverty and great need they gave more than they ought to have been able to after having given themselves to Christ. How can we, in our own riches, do less?

The enablement of New Testament believers is in faith by grace.

Grace gives us the desire and ability to do what God commands. Enabling grace flows into our lives as we stimulate our faith in reading the Scripture, listening to preaching, participating in communion, meditating and praying over God’s Word.

Part of this enabling grace, according to Paul, is that God has provided all we need for every good work. Every believer has been entrusted with what you are to give. It is the first 10% of your gross income. We must not look at all our bills and say, “Now is there enough to tithe?” Rather, we are to set aside our tithe first and then to live on the rest, **NO MATTER WHAT THAT INVOLVES.**

The emphasis for New Testament believers is on getting in order to give.

He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing

something useful with his own hands, that he might have something to share with those in need. (NIV)

In Ephesians 4:28, Paul verbalizes that the alternative to stealing is that one should work, not to encourage greed but to enable giving. Thus, giving is also a way not only cultivating Christian character but also of dealing with the drives of depravity.

The Reward of Tithing

We all expect that there will be a reward for doing good. Even though all obedience ought to be driven by an enlarged vision of God, it is also decided by an eye on what God will do for us.

What the Reward Is Not

The promises of this text stand in particular relation to the covenant promises to Israel. That this is so flows from the fact that God identifies Himself as El Shaddai, the Name under which He covenanted with Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Many today have erroneously concluded from this, and a wealth of Old Testament texts like it, that the giving Christian can expect prosperity and wealth. Too often it simply means the prosperity and wealth of the people preaching this heinous error to the impoverishment of the people of God, spiritually and physically. Shame on you if you are involved in supporting such.

This text also cannot mean what was assumed when one preacher visiting in hospital accompanied by a layman commented that they were visiting someone who was having his tithe removed in the form of a gall bladder.

What the Reward Truly Is

The true reward for tithing in faith by grace is in Matthew 6:19-21. Jesus there says, "Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where moth and rust do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

This does not say that we will put our treasure where our heart is. It does not tell us what our heart is like, but where our heart is going to be. Where we put our treasure (our money) that is where our heart will be. Now, this means we must put our treasure where we want our heart to go. Put your time and money in the worldly wealth, and your heart will be mired in the temporal and trivial pleasures of this passing age. Invest in God's church, and your heart will go hard after God and His kingdom.

Conclusion

If you are going to deny tithing because it feels slavish and legal, beware lest you are jumping out of the frying pan of legal slavery to commandments into the carnal slavery to fear and greed. Sin lurks at both doors—the self-righteous door where sin welcomes the command to tithe in order to boast in piety; and the self-indulgent door where sin turns the truth away in order to justify its own purchases and worldly pleasures.

The whole Bible's teaching on tithing cuts the cord of carnal greed in your gaining and getting by enabling an enlarged generosity. But the knife is laid first on the bonds when you, by belief through grace, obey God in the tithe. To change the metaphor, your attitude toward giving is an expression of whether you serve God or the idol of money or materialism. Many of you do not give because you have succumbed to the lie that makes giving unimportant or not necessary. Many of you do not give simply because you do not want to. You want what God's portion of your income will buy for

If you are going to deny tithing so that you do not have to give at all, your motivation is wrong. If you deny tithing in order to give less, then your motivation for your theological position is at best suspect and at worse evil. Bottom line, if you set aside tithing and then you must be freed for greater generosity.

As someone has written, "What does not make sense at all is to say, 'We are in the New Testament now. We are not under the Law, we are free in Christ. We have seen the love of God in Christ in the cross. We have experienced His power for us in the resurrection. We have begun to taste the powers of the age to come. We are indwelt by the Spirit who causes us to be sons. No one can separate us from God's love. His promise is to supply all our need according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus. We have around us tremendous opportunity to spread the knowledge of the sovereignty of God in saving sinners. We have the great task of missions and ministry. Therefore, unlike the saints of old, we may be content to give less than a tithe.'" That logic has on it a sulfurous smell.

John Piper, writing on this text, points out that Paul does not use the command to tithe when discussing giving because he wanted to emphasize 1) willingness over constraint, 2) liberality over limitation, and 3) that all our getting and spending should be in the service of giving. The reason God pleads with you now to make tithing the launching pad of your generosity is because He wants you to be free—like the ravens and the lilies—free from the love of money and the fear of need.¹

¹ John Piper, *You Will Be A Land of Delight*, sermon – 12/6/1987 BBC.

Now, let me be very practical and very personal. I am going to be very blunt. I do not intend to be unkind. But I will not be misunderstood. And I pray that you will be on the alert for stiffness of neck and hardness of heart that resists the pointed application of these principles.

That many of you do not tithe is very evident. Consider the following analysis of our giving last calendar year.

Conclusion – Thinking practically and personally

- Parameters
 - ☞ General Fund
 - ☞ FY 2000 Totals
- Average Giving
 - All: \$2,245.07
 - >\$200: \$2,746.49

Less than \$1000	63	47%
Between \$1000 & \$2000	18	14%
Between \$2000 & \$3000	14	11%
Greater than \$3000	38	29%



35% give 80% of the budget

If every family in this church were faithful stewards, it would be staggering what God would enable us to do.

Conclusion – Thinking practically and personally

What if?

Families	103	Budget		\$ 392,350.00			
Average Income	\$ 40,000.00			\$ 50,000.00		\$ 60,000.00	
At 5%	\$ 206,000.00	\$ (186,350.00)	\$ 257,500.00	\$ (134,850.00)	\$ 309,000.00	\$ (83,350.00)	
At 8%	\$ 329,600.00	\$ (62,750.00)	\$ 412,000.00	\$ 19,650.00	\$ 494,400.00	\$ 102,050.00	
At 10%	\$ 412,000.00	\$ 19,650.00	\$ 515,000.00	\$ 122,650.00	\$ 618,000.00	\$ 225,650.00	
At 15%	\$ 618,000.00	\$ 225,650.00	\$ 772,500.00	\$ 380,150.00	\$ 927,000.00	\$ 534,650.00	



Beyond all this, imagine the rich sweet honey—of a church filled with souls and hearts yearning towards heaven and God, where their treasure is.

So you say to me, “What should I do? How can I begin to obey God?”

1. Make a budget. Add up all your income. Deduct 10%. Deduct your taxes. Now, everything else you do must be less than that.
2. Recognize that you may be harvesting the fruit of sinful choices – that is, you may be way over your head in debt or God has been chastening you in your finances and now it seems as though there is no way. You simply do not have the money. So, confess your sin to God. Commit yourself to obedience. Trust that God will supply (do you believe He will? Do you believe that God will make a way for you to obey Him? Do you believe that God leaves you to have no choice but to sin?)
3. Do radical amputation in order to avoid sin. In other words, many of you will have to downsize, sell, unload, get rid-of, cut back, reduce in order to obey God. Here is where the issues of the heart will surface. Do you really want to obey God? Do you really want to please Him? Or will you serve your stuff and hold tightly to what you own and actually owns you?
4. Stop making excuses. I have heard them all. God has too. He is not impressed:
 - a. *I tithe my time and ability.* Then you should be giving 16.8 hours per week to God in ministry at this church.
 - b. *I give to other churches, missions, ministries or charities.* The proportional giving ought to go to the church you are committed to, serving in and benefiting from. Give to those other organizations the above the tithe.
 - c. *I split my tithe between General and Building (or some other fund).* The Elders want this people to understand that we do not endorse such a practice. We have consistently called for Funds to be supported above the tithe.

So what then are the ruinous effects of robbing God? Greed and need. Some have been caught in the python’s steely grip of greed and some are suffering under the grinding load of financial distress. And saddest of all are hearts burrowing ever more deeply in the mud of earth.

Put God to the test. See if your heart follows your treasure. Watch the heaven showered supply meet each need. Do not neglect God’s house. Honor God in your stewardship. TITHE.

Notes

What God Pays Attention To

Malachi 3:13-18

Introduction

Harsh words are like deep knives with smooth blades—they cut deep. Most of us have borne the brunt of harsh words and deep cutting wounds they inflict. We know the inward shrinking that comes when friend or family flays us with words that sting and bite and devour our joy and fellowship. So we ought to pay attention when God says that we have spoken harsh words against Him. But first ...

The tapestry of this text is woven from threads of two colors. One thread is that of speaking and the other of serving



First, what strikes me forcibly from this passage is the sense that God is the unseen listener in every conversation. God has been listening to what they have been saying to each other about Him. These words in this text are not what is said to God, but what is said about God. In their talking to each other, their conversation implied things about God. In their mind and by their words it may seem that they had not have been talking about God at all. In the first paragraph, It sounds as though they were just talking about the way things are.

This truth must be impressed so deeply on our minds. We are on stage, if you will, before God. Every kitchen, every car, every den, every office, every where is a stage on which we are actors speaking our lines. God is in the front row of the dramas of our lives. No matter where, when or with whom we speak, God hears our conversations and He interprets perfectly what they imply about Him.

In fact, that is all that really matters about our conversations—what they imply about God.



The second thing that leaps out from these paragraphs is that there are two ways to apparently serve God. You may serve God as a slave or you may serve God as a son. So how can we know which way it is that we are serving God? That is the purpose of the first thread.

How we are serving God is evident from what we say about God.

Condemnation - What God Detests

(v.13-15)

So God has heard the conversations of many of the Israelites and what has heard in their words?

The Attitude of their Words

(v.13)

The NIV translates this as saying harsh things about God. The NASB translates it as arrogant or strong. It is the terrible force of their words, like some great forest fire fanned by the winds of their circumstances and fueled by the dry timber of their rotting theology that is exposed.

There was an awful arrogance in their words.

The Theology in their Words

(v.14-15)

Their words indicate what they believe. Tozer points out that what a man thinks about God is the most important thing about him. And how a man speaks tells you much about how he thinks. Israel's arrogant words make two implications about God: it is pointless to serve God and it is profitable not to serve God.

It is Pointless to Serve God

(v.14)

The words of these verses point to two immense problems in their lives.

The Futility of their Spiritual Expectations

They were trying to serve God out of what they expected to gain in return. Now they could have fallen into this, as many have, by a wrong use and application of what has gone before. "I will serve you God if you will do such-and-such in return. I will tithe if you promise to bless. After all, you can't out give God." We expect that X amount of blessing (how ever we gauge that) will flow from X amount of obedience (how ever we measure that) in X amount of time (as soon as possible).

Paul said that he had learned to be content in whatever his circumstances, whether in hunger or in plenty. And few have served God so well and suffered so much. But this does not mean that he has given up on God's blessing because of obedience. Rather, Paul was willing to leave to God the timing and the proportion of the material blessing, even if it meant beyond death.

Their service of God had become slavish , quid pro quo religion.

The Formality of their Spiritual Exercises

Isaiah 58:1-4

Their keeping of God's commands and feigned remorse over their sins were mere formal exercises not vital experiences. Their forms of worship on the Lord's day were followed by faithlessness on the next day. We may have emotionally intense worship on Sunday. But if it does not issue in faithfulness on Monday then our lives are simply contradicting our liturgy. And God hears this.

This can only mean that the authenticity of our Sunday morning and evening worship is not merely in its intensity (and that is indispensable for genuine worship) but whether we leave the service and walk into a life of sinning.

Their worship of God had become lifeless formalism, pro forma religion.

The essence of this problem is that they thought they were religious just because of certain religious forms they practiced. Is your religion marked by a quid pro quo and a pro forma religion?

It is Profitable to not Serve God

(v.15)

They looked at all the arrogant, forceful people and concluded that it is not the meek who inherit the earth. A correct observation, "evildoers prosper" led to a wrong conclusion "the wicked are blessed." They pushed their sinful logic so far as to say that even those who test God escape.

That this is a nagging doubt in many Christian's minds emerges from our admiration of certain sports figures. We see them behaving on and off the court or playing field in ways that are reprehensible and they are even rewarded financially for it. The more radical their lifestyle the more wealth they reap. It makes us wonder sometimes if we have got it all wrong! Some will even go so far as to flaunt corrupt lifestyles in open defiance of God while pulling down multi-million dollar per year salaries and endorsements. Careful loved ones. God is listening to what is implied about Him when we uphold our heroes. NO ONE ESCAPES FROM GOD.

Their words showed an admiration for what God abhorred. By their admiration of the forceful and the strong, they had become forceful and strong against God.

Commendation - What God Delights In (v.16-17)

Not only in the context of this passage, but in the circumstances of this passage—when religious people evidence that they are serving God out form and think it is a vain waste of time, God’s people begin to talk among themselves.

The Attitude of their Words

The godliness of their attitude is expressed in this text in two significant phrases, their fear of God and their esteem of His Name.

Their Fear of God

This is mentioned twice. In times when evildoers prosper even to the point of testing and flaunting themselves against God, Christians need a deep sense of fearing God. This is a deep reverence for God flowing out of His knowing of us, all our ways, all our words. It is fed by seeing that God evaluates us. Those who truly fear God cannot be arrogant against God.

How we need a fresh mind informing, soul stirring, affection awakening, will changing embracing of the doctrine of the fear of God. How that fear of a majestic Father ought to frame our conversation. And in this day of coarse familiarity with God we must cultivate by all the means of grace available to us a constant fear of God.

Their Esteem of God

What does it mean to esteem God or to esteem His Name?

- It means that we hold in high regard an elevated sense of the character of God. The esteem of God is developed as we work through the Scripture and hear what God says about Himself and then affirm, embrace and adore what He discloses.
- It means that we honor God as having a unique and central place in our lives. The esteem of God looks like people who are living passionately, purposefully and purely for the glory and gladness, for the love and joy of God.
- It means that we use the value and worth of His Person and character as standards to evaluate everything. The esteem of God becomes the sine quo nom of Biblical discernment. We are not esteeming God when we affirm ourselves, people, churches, movements and ideas that are in conflict with what God has said about Himself.

Maybe the reason there is so little esteem of God is that there is so much esteeming of self. I believe that one day we will wake up from the narcissistic dream of self-esteem and self-worth. We will only do so however when God raises up men and women of God who ring the

alarm and the Spirit once again gives us the grace of broken and contrite hearts. Then the blurred lines of the glory and worth and esteem of God which are only seen darkly and dimly now will once again shine bright in the lives of God's church

The Response to their Words

Notice how the response of God to their words becomes an encouragement to us. For those who are on the road to fearing and esteeming God, here are some landmarks to confirm our path.

God's Attention to Them

He hears and heeds them. He will remember every word spoken for His glory and other's good. That God hears and journalizes what we say and imply good about God ought to stir us up to more holy and significant conversations.

God's Treasuring of Them

He takes them as His own when He is putting together the things He treasures.

Most of us have had to make moves in our lives, some of us more than others. Moves are times when you go through all your stuff and really decide whether it is worth packing. Now it is a good thing for spouses both to be involved in this process for it is most true the saying "One man's junk is another man's treasure" when it comes to husbands and wives. I remember the kids, when we had to discard some things coming home from Germany, selecting the things they wanted above all. This is the picture these verses give. God will make us HIS OWN when He gathers up that which He treasures.

Now God's delight in us is rooted in His delight in Christ and His treasuring of us is grounded in His valuing the worth of Christ. We have no intrinsic worth to Him, but we are treasured in the measure by which we esteem and value Christ. We are like the moon, we only shine when we are reflecting the bright glory of Another.

God's Being Served by Them.

The language here reflects Psalm 103:13, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the Lord has compassion on those who fear Him." The serving here is not that of a slave, but that of a son. It is the difference between the works of the law and the obedience of faith. It is the difference between the elder and the younger brother at the end of the story of the prodigal son. The younger brother, bowed and broken, fearing His father and esteeming His honor, joyfully came to serve His Father for he knew that being at home was the greatest blessing. The elder brother had the mindset of a slave—I have worked harder than anybody to earn a blessing.

Consequence - Why This is Important

(v.18)

- Because God promises that all ambiguity between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve as slaves and those who serve as sons will one day be cleared up.
- Because we are to use this to discern between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve as slaves and those who serve as sons.
- Because we can have an inward sense of whether we are righteous or wicked, whether we are serving as slaves or serving as sons.

Conclusions

So, what is it that God pays attention to? If He is the unseen listener to every conversation, weighing and evaluating what that conversation implies about Himself, then it seems He is hearing it all. Yes, but what really grabs His attention? When those who, in awe and reverence of His character and person, converse about life in such a way that God is acknowledged and esteemed. In other words, we have had such an experience of God by the Spirit in the Word that our whole way of talking is transformed. That this is so is forcibly borne out by James. "If anyone considers himself religious and yet does not keep a tight reign on his tongue, he deceives himself and his religion is worthless." (James 1:26, NIV) Vital, living religion (in the old and honored sense of the word) will transform the tongue from a poisoned well to a sweet spring.

So what kind of people are we to be then? What is the mindset of the righteous, the true servant of God? What is it that God really pays attention to?

Fear God

Hallow His Name above all Names

Serve Him like a son serves a Majestic Father.

Revere My Name

Malachi 4:1-6

Introduction

So, we are coming to the end of the burden of the prophet Malachi. As we have approached this great spokesman for God, we have examined carefully what that burden consists of. As we have unwrapped the package, we have found two great weights which have bowed the shoulders of the messenger of God.

- *THE WEIGHT OF THE SIN OF THE PEOPLE IN NOT HONORING GOD.* That the people of God had sinned greatly was very evident to God. What piled weight upon weight was the denial of their sin and their scorn of God. It will do us little good if we find ourselves under the same load.
- *THE WEIGHT OF THE GLORY OF GOD REQUIRING THAT HE BE HONORED.* The brightness, purity and weightiness of God's glory should have called forth deep expressions of honor from their lips and their lives. The press of that glory is to wring out from hearts tender towards God the sweet juice of joy and gladness in God.

Remember, this was written to people who thought they were the people of God. The root of their failure to honor God bore fruit in their love, in their worship, in their leadership, in their marriages, in their giving and in their conversations.

The alarm that was rung in their day can be so clearly heard today. In this text, Malachi's burden is to point much further down the road of time. There is a time when God is going to deal with those who do not honor Him and in His mercy will turn hearts back in those who will honor Him. And that time is now.

The Rising of the Sun of Righteousness (v.1-3)

There is coming a day when God Himself will rise over the horizon of eternity and will shine brightly on the landscape of time. Notice the two very different results of that rising.

What It Will Mean for the Wicked (v.1)

That brazen sun will burn down on the desert and the chaff of wicked men and will set them ablaze. Many of us have been given (and then probably had taken away) a magnifying glass. It was great fun to look down into the smallness of things and see the detail. But, O the day when we discovered that the magnifying glass would so focus the rays of the sun that we could light paper, burn our names in the fence or

fry the ants scampering for safety. Just so, the brightness of the glory of God magnified in the lens of His holiness will focus on the arrogant and the wicked and so utterly destroy them in the blaze of His righteousness that the smoke of their torment will rise forever.

Now, many today object that it is unfair that God should punish for eternity a lifetime of sin and reject outright the doctrine of eternal punishment. Why should men and women and boys and girls who committed three score and ten years of sins suffer without end in the furnace of God? The message of the Bible proclaims that it is not the extent of the sins committed, but the exalted holiness and glory of the One sinned against which incurs eternal condemnation. Each sin against an infinitely holy and loving and gracious God—each and every thought and act of falling short of the glory of God is the casting of the filthiness, the excrement, the dung, the vomit of our depravity on the bright beauty of God, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This day is coming—will you be like some ant be scrambling for safety calling for the rocks and mountains to fall on you? Will you be trying to hide yourself from His wrath then when you ought to be fleeing to His mercy today?



But the bright blaze of the glory of God will bring something very different to those who revere the name of God.

What it Will Mean for the Godly

(v.2-3)

The same sun that bakes the desert and blasts Death Valley also warms the waving fields of golden grain and the backs of leaping calves. The sin and sorrow will vanish like dew in the morning sun. Our hearts will leap upwards in frolicking joy as the brightness of God's glory and goodness fills us and reflects from us like mirrors.

I am coming more and more to see that it is our sin and sinfulness which makes the awesome presence of God such a humbling and devastating experience today. But there will come a day when we will with open face gaze on the beauty of Christ. I say this, not to encourage flippancy and undue familiarity, but to draw out a reverent joy. You see, it is those who REVERE THE NAME OF GOD who will leap with joy in that day. It is those who exalt God, who will exult in God.

Verse three points to an aspect of that day which we can scarcely comprehend today. Now, we are to proclaim pardon to the wicked; in that day we will so comprehend the unimaginable glory and holiness of God that we will exult in the mighty exercises of God's justice. But not yet, not yet.



So what do we do till that day? How are we to know what reverence and honor and esteem of God looks like against the backdrop of our own world place in redemptive history?

The Remembering of the Word

(v.4)

The lack of reverence, of honor, of esteeming the Lord was caused by their lack of reading, studying, meditating on and obeying God's Word. The call here was to remember the essence of how they were to honor God in holy worship and walk.

It is no different for us today. We have failed to honor God:

In our Love

Too much of what is called love for God is nothing but sentimentality. And much of our contemporary Christian music is instilling in us an *eros* based approach to loving God. When we will hear messages, songs and testimonies that honor the sovereign freedom of God to love Jacob and hate Esau?

In our Worship

We must honor God in our worship by coming to God in spirit and truth. We have tried to sanctify any offering of worship no matter how marred. The worship that honors God, sustains God's people.

In our Leadership

We must have a leadership (and not just in the elders) who honor God in their commitment to the Word of God. Every Sunday School teacher, youth leader, children's church leader must see their job as penetrating the hearts of their hearers with the Word. And they must do that with integrity.

In our Marriages

We must honor God in our marriages through sacrificial deeds of love. We must see our marriages as small dramas in which the greater reality of Christ and the church is played out on the world's stage.

In our Giving

We must honor God, not just in our tithing, but in our whole approach to stewardship. Are we getting, so that we may give? Have we invested our treasure in heaven so that our heart will follow it?

In our Conversations

We must honor God in what we say to one another. We must speak truth and do so in love. Do we understand that out of our heart our mouth speaks?

All of these questions must find answers in the Word of God. It is absolutely no use to diagnose problems of heart and respond with treatments of the toenails. One of the greatest ways to honor God is stop “boring in to [yourself] to see what psychological or social categories [you] might belong to” and simply obey God. Remember His Word.



In verses 5-6 is the heart of understanding the methods of God. It is in two phrases: “I will send” and “I will come”. It reflects the structure of Malachi 3:1. There God will send His messenger before Lord will come to His temple. Here, He will send Elijah before He will come to strike. When He sends, it is to refine and to restore. When He comes, it is to judge and make and end of. There is mercy before there is judgment.

Before the awful and awesome day of the Lord, He will send Elijah. Now there are many interpretations of what this means. Since John the Baptist is credited as coming in this office and yet the book of Revelation points to something yet future, it is my conviction that we are living between the messenger of Malachi 3:1 and the Elijah of Malachi 4:5. So then, in the light of both the terrible judgment and terrific jubilee of that day, what is a ministry honoring to God like?

The Restoring of the Hearts

(v.5-6)

Before He comes, God sends Messenger of Mercy.

Highlights the Messenger

(v.5)

Why is Elijah chosen as the one prophet to come before that day? Why not Isaiah with his incomparable vision of the glory of God? Why not Ezekeiel with his frightening vision of the throne of God? Why not Daniel with his amazing vision of the plan of God? Why not Jeremiah with his sorrowing vision for the compassion of God? Why not Habakkuk with his faithful vision of the righteousness of God? Why Elijah?

The reasons emerge from background of Elijah’s ministry. He prophesied in Israel when the majority of Israelites followed the King and Queen into gross idolatry. Yet God had prepared a remnant of His choosing who refused to bow and worship. Into this setting comes the mighty prophet from Tish to confront the people with reality of God through prophesy, preaching and prayer. His focus in that day was to turn the hearts of the people back to Jehovah. What will be it be in that day?

Highlights the Ministry

(v.6)

He turns hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers. This is a surprising ministry. This is not one that we would attribute to Elijah.

What are we to think of when we hear these words? The restoration of godly families. In language calculated to capture the attention of those who are responsible for godliness in the family, God moves to restore His own honor at home. God is honored by parents and by children who are carrying out Biblical obedience in the context of their home and family.

How this is needed today. We are witnessing the growing exposure of the horror of physical and sexual and emotional abuse of children. We have seen the growing rebellion of children. The last few years have seen teens killing their parents in cold blood. The newspapers have carried stories recently of a young boy killing his father.

But that is not what is probably in view here. What is in view here are the sort of acceptable forms. Parents who give little time or thought or training to their children. Children who disobey and disregard their parents.

They do not see that when they do not honor God in their homes, then God will come and strike with a curse. And the curse that come on the generations after Malachi was the awful silence of a God withdrawn.

And so are our messengers and ministry today. We need men who will confront the spirit of the age and the wickedness around us with preaching and prayer. And we must bring a message of restoring family, fathers hearts to their children and children's hearts to their parents.

Conclusion

2 Thessalonians 1:7b-10

Paul echoes this same language in this New Testament text. When Jesus is revealed from heaven in blazing fire, He will punish the evil doers and He will be glorified in His people who will marvel.

I am not Elijah nor am I Paul, but I stand before you as a messenger of this ministry. I stand to declare to you that before the day of judgment comes the hour of mercy is announced. God's wrath is just over the horizon. Plead His mercy today. Repent of your sin. Believe and obey the gospel. Kiss the Son so that He will rise for you with healing in His wings and you will go out and leap with joy like calves.

In order to be spared of the curse, people must be changed. God must do the work of turning hearts. And though it is an inward work, it will

have outward consequences. When God turns hearts, fathers and children will, in practical visible ways, turn to each other.

In closing this study, we must consider whether we are honoring God. Do we truly esteem Him and reverence His Name? Here is how we can honor God.

We affirm the sovereign love of God. We honor God in His freedom to love Jacob and hate Esau. We are struck, then with awe and wonder that He has chosen to love us.

We come to our worship prepared and expecting to meet God. We join in with the best of our praise. We use the spiritual gifts God has given us in ministry. We hear and heed God's Word in the preaching.

We honor and submit to godly leadership who is committed to the Word.

We build marriages that are truly Christian where loving sacrifice and submission are exhibited in the daily grind.

We give our tithes to our church with joyful hearts.

We guard our conversations carefully, speaking to one another what is good for each other's edification.

Now listen to the words of Malachi:

"Where is my honor and where is my respect?" says the Lord Almighty. My Name will be great among the nations. I am a great King and my Name is to be feared. Set your heart to honor my Name. Revere me and stand in awe of my Name. And for you who revere my Name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in His wings.

How we long for a day when in every heart, in every home, in every pew, in every pulpit the glory of God is esteemed and valued so that God would say, "You have revered my Name. Well done."