

Malachi

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There are some experiences that are universal to humankind, and one of them is getting stuck in a rut. All of us are familiar with the lethargic feeling that comes from doing the same old, same old, and inevitably, whenever we get to feeling that way, our performance suffers. Ennui frequently leads people to make changes in their lives, anything from changing chore responsibilities to changing jobs.

A more serious call for change arises when we get stuck in a spiritual rut. God is not pleased with half-hearted service from His people, and we can't very well change gods. The only way for us to deal with the problem is to change ourselves, to rediscover that same sense of blessing that dominated our initial relationship with God. To help us with this, let's look at what God says on the subject in Malachi.

Reforming the Priesthood

The first main context of Malachi concerns reforming the priesthood. The prophet's warnings were originally directed to the Levitical priesthood of the Law of Moses, but because we are kings and priests to God, we can easily apply them to ourselves today. The first section of this warning concerns **THE PRIESTS' MISDEEDS**. Let's read from Malachi 1:6-9. On its face, this text doesn't seem to have anything to do with us. After all, it concerns the practice of animal sacrifices under the Law, and that Law was nailed to the cross along with Christ. However, we must recognize that the New Testament describes many of our practices as Christians as sacrifices. Romans 12 tells us that our bodies are to be living sacrifices. Philippians 4 identifies contributing to the Lord's work as a spiritual sacrifice. Hebrews 13 likewise describes praising God, doing good, and sharing all as sacrifices.

Just as the Levitical priests of Malachi's day had a problem with not offering the best animal sacrifices to God, we can have a problem with not offering our best spiritual sacrifices. We can devote our bodies to sin instead of to the Lord. We can contribute at the time of collection in a half-hearted, ungrateful way. We can sing to God thoughtlessly and mechanically instead of from our hearts.

When we behave in this way, it's a spiritual disaster. God's words to the priests in Malachi make clear His disgust with their attitude. They were trying to get away with doing the minimum for Him, even though they wouldn't dare treat a human governor with such casual disrespect. How about us? What would happen if we served our human employers with the same zeal and faithfulness with which we serve God? Would that get us rewards and promotions, or would it get us fired?

Next, Malachi points to the reason why this slipshod attitude is a problem: **GOD'S GREATNESS**. Let's look at Malachi 1:10-14. As far as God is concerned, halfway isn't going to cut it. He'd rather have no worship and no people at all than worship that dishonors Him and people who dishonor Him through apathy. "Shut the doors!" He says to the people of Malachi's day, and if that's the best we can come up with too, He doesn't want to hear from us either. The greatness of His name demands our whole-hearted allegiance, and if we aren't willing to give Him that, we might as well become His open enemies for all the good it's doing us.

Here, Malachi also discusses the motivation behind half-hearted service. It arises from a disdain for the things of God and a conviction that serving Him is tiresome. This same attitude can easily become a problem for us. If we grumble about getting out of bed on Sunday morning to come to services, we are expressing our disdain for God. If we roll our eyes at the thought of singing praises to Him or learning from His word, we're showing Him that we think His worship is tiresome. Our attitude will corrupt our actions.

We need to remember, friends, that worshiping and serving God isn't like paying an occasional visit to a boring older relative. Instead, it's a privilege. On our own, we would have no right even to go near Him. He would turn us into grease spots if we tried. He is holy. We aren't. He gave up His own Son to death on the cross to cleanse us. And then, after He, the Creator of heaven and earth, has done so much for us, we act like we're doing Him a favor by deigning to show up and offer Him grudging worship! Is it any wonder that God is offended by such a display of ingratitude and disrespect? Let's give Him the honor He deserves.

If we doubt whether this is a good choice, we should consider the **WARNING** that God next provides. Read with me from Malachi 2:1-3. The point here is pretty plain. If we do not honor God for

blessing us, He will soon stop blessing us. If we dishonor Him by our lackluster service, He will dishonor us. God doesn't bluster, friends. God doesn't bluff. He is patient with us, far more patient than we would be if we were in His position. He gives us warning after warning in His word because ultimately, destroying us is the last thing that He wants to do. If we won't listen to His word, He'll let us taste the consequences of our actions in this life in the hope that a more painful message will get through. However, if we go on as half-hearted, apathetic, bored-with-it-all Christians, our encounter with Him on the Day of Judgment will surely not be a pleasant one! Destroying us may be the last thing that God wants to do, but if we force Him to it, destroy us He will. He cannot allow us to diminish His glory and mock His name and still remain God.

Finally in this section, God presents us with a vision of **THE IDEAL PRIESTHOOD**, what the priests of Malachi's day and indeed we ourselves are supposed to be like. This vision appears in Malachi 2:4-9. What strikes me about it is how it doesn't seem to line up with God's complaint against the priests. His vision of the ideal priesthood isn't one of priests who only offer the best sacrifices. Instead, it is a vision of priests who know God's law, obey God's law, and teach others God's law. Though the priests' spiritual problems had the symptom of apathy, they led back to a lack of regard for the word.

The same is true for us. If we have an enthusiasm problem in our worship and service, it's ultimately a word problem. We don't know the word as we should, we aren't obeying the word as we should, and we aren't teaching others the word as we should. That's what produces listlessness among God's people.

The only cure for word problems is the word. We need to love it, we need to read it on our own, and we need to put it into practice. If we do all these things, something else will result. People around us will recognize us as different and come to us when they want to know about God. What Malachi describes here in v. 7 closely resembles one of the favorite evangelistic dodges of Christians. There are plenty of brethren who claim that they will be happy to talk about their faith to anyone who asks them. The problem is that these same brethren live in a way that differs only slightly from their neighbors, so they don't stand out. People have to see God in us before they will seek God with us.

Refining the People

In the next section of Malachi, the prophet discusses the need to refine the people. This begins with a discussion of **MARRIAGE PROBLEMS**. Let's look at Malachi 2:10-16. This section addresses two separate problems, and we're going to begin by looking at the second one first. In this second section, Malachi paints a picture of a man who seeks God with pleading and tears, yet is rejected. At first glance, this seems strange. After all, doesn't the Scripture say, "Seek, and you shall find"? However, this man has a problem. He has betrayed the wife of his youth by divorcing her, and so he has no place before God.

Clearly, what the word says here runs counter to our culture. Though God may hate divorce, Americans seem to love it, at least judging by the frequency with which they practice it. This may even run counter to our thinking in the church. We spend so much time teaching on the problems associated with marriage, divorce, and remarriage (and we're about to do more of that) that we may well forget that there are problems associated with divorce on its own. Christians may think, "Well, it's OK for me to divorce my wife, as long as neither one of us remarries thereafter."

Not so. Divorce by itself is something that the Lord hates, and those who claim to be His followers should never divorce unless they are driven to it by an unfaithful spouse. Even then, we should consider divorce a last resort, not a right. God expects us to keep covenant with the husbands and wives of our youth.

This takes us to the first half of this context. Here, Malachi condemns an act that is not condemned under the new covenant—marrying outside of God's people. However, it is still possible for us to betray our brethren by the choices that we make in marriage. When we violate God's law by marrying one to whom we have no right under Matthew 19, we corrupt not only ourselves, but also the congregation of which we are a part. As individuals, we must honor the teaching of our Lord on marriage, divorce, and remarriage, and if there is one among us who will not, we must honor that teaching as a church by withdrawing from the sinner.

Ultimately, though, all these problems can only be solved by the One whom Malachi describes as **THE REFINER**. Let's read about Him in Malachi 2:17-3:4. This section begins with words that strike us as very contemporary in their cynicism. Apparently, as is true in our own day, people wondered why God allowed wickedness to continue, and in turn used that as reason for doubting the existence of God. Malachi's

answer to that argument is quite simple. God, preceded by His messenger, was coming to purify His people. Clearly, this prophecy concerns first John the Baptist and second Jesus.

This reminds us of something extremely significant about the nature of our Lord. Jesus stands for love, certainly. Jesus stands for mercy, absolutely. However, He also stands for purity and holiness. He came because God can tolerate nothing less than a pure and purified people. This purity must exist in the record of our lives, which has been washed clean by the blood of Jesus. However, it must also exist in our hearts. We must be a people zealous for good works, a people who love nothing better than to please God.

Sadly, God's people all too often fail to live up to this standard. Too many brethren think they can get away with being double-minded, with keeping one foot in the world and the other in the kingdom of God. They think they can indulge in sin, as long as they don't go too far or practice any of the really bad sins. They think that showing up for church services is all the work they need to do for the Lord.

Brethren, that is not purity! It is compromise, no less than the priests of Malachi's day compromised by offering blemished sacrifices. Christ has come to purify us, but if we are not willing to be pure, He will purify His holy nation by removing us from it. There is no such thing as halfway holiness.

Next, Malachi reminds us of **GOD'S CHANGELESSNESS**. Read with me from Malachi 3:5-6. As human beings, we change much more than we think we do. We may think we're basically the same people we have always been, but the reality is that we are either growing toward God or moving away from Him. God, on the other hand, does not change. This has two implications. First, God will continue to be just as He has ever been just. He cannot tolerate wickedness, and He will judge it. Adulterers, liars, and oppressors of the poor today can expect to face His condemnation as they could expect it 2500 years ago.

On the other hand, God continues to be merciful. He is faithful to His word even when His people are not faithful to theirs. He desires to rescue us, not to condemn us, and if we seek Him according to His will, we will find Him. Because He does not change, He is a God whom we can trust.

Before the Lord's Supper, let's reflect on all we've learned. Let's remember Jesus as our great Refiner. He came to earth to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, and He was so determined that we be pure that He shed His own blood to accomplish it. There is no better measure of the severity of sin than that the Son of God had to die for our sins to be forgiven. Second, let's examine our own lives. Let's look into our own hearts. Let's determine whether both contain the purity that the Lord expects.

Resolution

The final section of Malachi concerns God's resolution of His problems with His people. These have first of all to do with **TITHING**. Read with me from Malachi 3:7-12. Here too, we hit an Old-Testament concept with a New-Testament application. We are no longer under the Law of Moses; nothing in the law of Christ asks us to tithe. However, this text still has a great deal to say to us about gratitude.

God's complaint about His people here is that they are robbing Him. They are giving Him less than He deserves. Let me suggest that even though we don't have a hard number to aim for, it is still possible for us to rob God in the way that we contribute, or don't contribute, to His work today. God certainly blesses us physically and financially, but His greatest blessings come to us spiritually. Consider the Hebrews writer's perspective on this. He identifies the characteristics of the old covenant in this way: The law of the old covenant was spoken through angels. The promised land for God's people then was Canaan. Their high priests were Aaron and his descendants. Bulls and goats were the inadequate sacrifices for their sins. Under that covenant, the appropriate return for God's people to make was 10 percent.

Under the new covenant, by contrast, we have a law that was delivered by Christ Himself. The land that God has promised to us is the eternal kingdom of heaven. The perfect Son of God, and not some fallible man, is our high priest. Finally, Jesus gave His own life for us and put away sin for all time by the sacrifice of Himself. Those are our blessings, the blessings of a better covenant enacted on better promises.

The Scripture tells us that we are to give as we have purposed in our hearts. I'm going to invite everyone here this morning to purpose. In the light of all that God has done for us, what is the amount of our income that we know in our hearts is right for us to return to Him? I don't need to know anybody's number, but you know it, and God knows it.

Now, sometimes we don't have the resources to do that. I know there are members here who struggle to keep a roof over their heads and the lights on every month, and we can't very well give as we have

been prospered if we haven't been prospering. However, for the rest of us, who have been prospering, are we giving in the way that we know in our hearts is right? If we aren't, then we are robbing God.

In the next section of the book, Malachi tackles the topic of **THE RIGHTEOUS AND THE WICKED**. Let's read Malachi 3:13-18 together. Once again, the critics whom Malachi cites speak with a very modern voice. They're complaining that they don't get anything out of serving God. They say, "Here we are, suffering through all this boring stuff that God wants us to do, and it doesn't do us any good, but over there are all these other people who don't care anything for God, and they're getting along just fine."

God describes this attitude as arrogance. "Arrogance" is an interesting word. It means sort of the same thing as "pride", but there's an added nuance to it. When we are arrogant, we don't simply think highly of ourselves. We claim a position to which we are not entitled.

The position that these critics are claiming, both then and today, is the right to sit in judgment on God. They're saying, "God, you're not giving me what I deserve. You're not running the world the way that I think You should. As a result, I'm going to ignore You until You start doing a better job." This same attitude is present in the hearts of those who stop going to church because they "don't get anything out of it." Brethren, being a Christian isn't about what *we* get out of it at all! It's about seeing that God gets what He deserves, then showing His mercy to our brother and our neighbor. We don't figure into the equation.

This is one direction we can head. The second portion of this context represents the other. Instead of being arrogant against God, we can fear Him and esteem His name. People like this aren't interested in second-guessing the way that God runs the world. They don't groan about how pointless it is to obey Him. They don't come to the Lord in search of self-fulfillment. Instead, they are concerned with glorifying Him.

These are the people whom God is going to remember. God is patient, and ever since the beginning, people have confused God's patience with a lack of concern for evil. However, God's patience is limited, and when He has finished His judgments, no one will confuse the righteous with the wicked. Those who honor Him will become His precious possession, but those who dishonor Him will meet with a very different fate.

Malachi's prophecy concludes with a depiction of **JUDGMENT**. It appears in Malachi 4:1-6. Even though it's not as obvious, I don't think this is something directly addressed to our situation either. As we've discussed, the Scriptures describe not one judgment of the Lord, but several. In context, it appears that this one is the judgment of AD 70, in which Herod's Temple was destroyed and the Jewish nation crushed by its Roman overlords. Otherwise, it doesn't make a whole lot of sense to talk about the final judgment as being prepared for by John the Baptist.

Regardless, though, our lives still fit into the same Biblical pattern. Over and over again, we see God's people turning away from Him and being punished for their wickedness while God preserves the righteous as a remnant. It could be that this same process is going to happen again in an earthly sense. I don't think it would shock any of us if in future we see the increasingly wicked nation of the United States facing a day of God's wrath. Though I don't see the Bible specifically predicting this, it may well happen.

What will certainly happen, however, is that we, along with all the other human beings who have ever lived, will face one final judgment on the day when the earth and its works are burned up. On that day, the righteous will be rewarded and the wicked will be eternally punished. We might think that we can get away with being apathetic, half-hearted servants, but we can't. We might think that we can get away with playing fast and loose with God's rules about marriage, but we can't. We might think that we can get away with arrogantly questioning God, but we can't. Our claim to the title of "Christian" will not be enough to save us. Instead, God will rescue only the righteous, but leave the wicked to perish.