

Malachi

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Now, at the very end of the list of the minor prophets, we come to the book of Malachi. About this prophet, we know nothing. In fact, we're not even sure that his name is Malachi, because the name in Hebrew means "the messenger of the Lord," and Malachi 1:1 could be referring to the prophet's function rather than his name.

We know a little bit more about the time in which he writes. In Malachi 1, he uses "the governor" as an illustration, which refers to the Persian governors of Judah after the Jews returned from the Babylonian captivity. Likewise, Malachi discusses worship in the temple throughout the book, which means that he must be writing after the time of Haggai and Zechariah, who were instrumental in having the temple rebuilt. This leaves Malachi as the last of all the Old Testament prophets, and he probably wrote his book somewhere between 420 and 400 B.C.

This, of course, is still more than 2400 years before our time, and it's reasonable to ask why we should pay attention to even the inspired words of a man so long dead. However, just as we've seen with so many of the minor prophets to this point, Malachi's message is still extraordinarily relevant to us. Unlike his earlier peers, Malachi isn't facing a time of total apostasy. The Jews have finally gotten it through their heads that turning from God to idols is foolish.

However, this doesn't keep them from sinning against Him in more subtle ways. Instead of rejecting His law entirely, they've fallen into a pattern of nibbling around the edges. They'll bring sacrifices, but they won't be good sacrifices. They'll contribute something to the maintenance of the temple, but not a whole tithe.

Sadly, there are many Christians today who fall into this same trap. They serve God according to His word, but they only serve Him as little as they think they can get away with. We need to recognize that in reality, God is watching us, and we can't get away with slacking. We need to be a purer people, the people described in Malachi.

Respecting God's Greatness.

In the most general terms, the first part of the book is Malachi's instruction to respect the greatness of God, and one of the object lessons about this greatness will be what happens to the nation of Edom. Malachi explores this topic in Malachi 1:1-5. The reasons for this antipathy are historical. A few hundred years back, the Edomites had helped the Babylonians besiege and destroy Jerusalem, and they even occupied southern Judea after the Jews were carried captive. This enraged both the Jews and their God. Shortly thereafter, the Edomites' own nation was destroyed, and they were driven out by a nomadic tribe called the Nabateans. As God here predicts, they never again rebuilt the cities of Edom proper, and by the time of Christ, they had been entirely absorbed by the Jews. The lesson that the Jews were to learn from this, and that we should learn too, is that God is sure to punish those who offend Him, whoever they are.

This wasn't meant as a warning only to the Edomites, as Malachi emphasizes in Malachi 1:6-14. Here, God takes the Israelites to task for denying Him the honor that He has so richly earned. These are people who would reserve the best of the best for their governor, who was nothing more than an underling of the king of Persia, and yet would attempt to cheat God, who was the King of heaven itself, by offering Him animals that were sick and lame and blind.

Nor was this some kind of innocent mistake. The law of Moses clearly specified that sacrifices were to be unblemished, the kind of animals that would command the highest prices on the market. However, the Jews hoped to placate God with offerings that were the cheapest, most worthless they could present while still giving a sacrifice at all. This really irritated God, all the more so because He knew that soon, people all over the world would worship Him, and yet, His own chosen people in the land He had given them wouldn't show Him the reverence He deserved. God's take on it was that it would be better to close the doors of the temple instead of continuing to offer inferior worship.

It's all too easy for us to show our heavenly Father this kind of disrespect today. It's easy for us to give to Him, but not from our best. We show up for services, yes, but we come dressed in clothing that we would never dream of wearing to a funeral or to a job interview. We sing to Him, yes, but it's just our lips moving while our minds are elsewhere. We make time for Him in our lives, but only after all our other commitments and interests are fulfilled.

If that's our attitude toward Christianity, we can rest assured that God would condemn us just as strongly as He condemned the Jews of Malachi's time. As Jesus makes clear in His words to the Laodiceans in Revelation 3, in some ways, it's even worse to be a lukewarm Christian than to be no kind of Christian at all. When we've fallen away, at least then, we're under no illusions about our spiritual condition, but if we're still going through the motions, even though we're not fooling God, we may well be fooling ourselves, which will keep us from saving ourselves. We need to be committed to giving God our best in everything we do for Him, because anything less cannot be good enough.

We see part of the reason for this spiritual decline in Malachi 2:1-9. The people were lukewarm and ignorant because they weren't being properly instructed by the priests. Although we don't often realize it, in the Mosaic scheme, the priests had an important role to play in teaching the people about service to God, and that teaching role was part of

God's covenant with them. They were to teach the whole truth impartially so that the Jews could know what God expected. However, by Malachi's time, the priests were teaching whatever they wanted, and the people suffered for it.

Today, the Scripture teaches us in 1 Peter 2 that we are a holy priesthood, and the teaching role that was so central to the Levitical priesthood has now become ours. We need to ask if we are living up to God's expectations here. Do we tell others the whole truth of God's will for their lives? Do we keep our mouths pure from wicked speech? Do we turn many others aside from lives of sin? Do people come to us when they want to know what God wants? In short, are we the messengers of the Lord of hosts, or aren't we? This is a serious responsibility, brethren, and we need to take it seriously. We need to keep our covenant with God by consistently teaching others about His word.

The priests of Malachi's time may have failed to teach in many areas, but one of the most serious was in the area of divorce and remarriage. Look with me at Malachi 2:10-16. First, just as was true in Nehemiah's time, the people were easily tempted into marriages with foreign women. However, the bigger problem they had was with divorcing the wives they did have a right to. Just like they had little problem breaking their covenants with God, they broke their covenants with the wives of their youth. Instead of following God's plan for marriage and procreation, they followed their own lusts. They dealt treacherously with their spouses and engaged in the divorce that God declares He hates.

Brethren, we must remember that regardless of what the world does today, God still hates divorce. Every time a divorce is finalized, there is sin involved. It may be sin on one spouse's part, or on the part of both, but the sin is always present. If our husband or wife has been so sexually unfaithful to us that we can't stand the thought of living with them anymore, divorce in that circumstance is allowable. However, unless that infidelity has occurred, there's not a passage in Scripture that gives us the right to divorce, and if we divorce anyway, we are sinning. That's the law of God. We don't have to like it, but we do have to obey it, and woe be unto us if we do not!

Purifying God's People

All of this was caused in the Jews by an underlying lack of purity. We see it in Malachi 2:17-3:5. The people were so lackadaisical about obeying God because they believed He was apathetic too, that He didn't care whether they were good or evil. In response to this, Malachi prophesied that God was going to come Himself as the messenger of His covenant to purify His people, so that the good would become more righteous and the wicked would be punished.

This prophecy, of course, was fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. However, the purifying work of our Lord wasn't completed in the first century. It extends even to us. He expects us to be a righteous people, people who offer a pure sacrifice to Him with pure hands. His word is so uncompromising in its demands for our lives because God Himself is so uncompromising, and we need to let that word purify us. If we allow it to work in our lives, it will burn away even the sin that we hold most dear. We don't have to do that. We can close our ears to the message. We can shoot the messenger. However, even though that might help us rest easy in the here and now, it will give us no comfort in the hereafter.

This should affect every area of our lives, from the recreations we choose to the way we use our money. Malachi critiques the Jews' money usage in Malachi 3:6-12. God makes clear here that even though His people are wicked, He is still merciful. He will bless them if only they give Him the full tithe that the Law requires and that He deserves. However, by withholding part of that tithe, they are doing nothing less than robbing the Almighty.

Today, we also need to ask ourselves if we are robbing God. This is a much more subjective question than it used to be under the Old Law. The law of Christ doesn't set some kind of 10% threshold for our giving. Instead, in 1 Corinthians 15 and 2 Corinthians 9, God urges us to look into our hearts and be honest about all He has done for us. Then, we need to cheerfully give to Him according to the way that He has blessed us. This is not the leftover category of our budget. We don't write a check for whatever remains after we've paid all the bills and saved for vacations and Christmas presents. Instead, God needs to be the top line item in the budget. We need to give Him what we know is right and make all of our other expenditures work around that. If we don't, we're robbing Him just like the Jews did.

We see the Jews' final spiritual problem, and God's final response to it, laid out in Malachi 3:13-4:5. Here, we see an even fuller depiction of the Jews' cynicism at this time. They said, "Even when we obey God, we don't get anything out of it. The good are not rewarded, and the wicked are not punished." God's response to this is twofold. First, He does remember those who are righteous, and they will be rewarded. Second, the day is also going to come when the wicked are going to be punished, and before that day of the Lord comes, the people are going to be warned by Elijah, the great purifying prophet of the time of the kings of Israel, who would lead the people to restoration.

All of these prophecies saw their fulfillment in the time of Christ. The prophecy of Elijah was fulfilled by John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus, and Jesus led on the day of the Lord, when the Jewish nation either obeyed His gospel or suffered in the destruction of the fall of Jerusalem. However, this message of restoration and reward still applies to us. Like the Jews, we need to shed our cynicism about God and His word. It does matter when we do right. It does matter when others do wrong, and the day will come when God will reward each accordingly. Until then, we must constantly seek to be restored to Him, so that our names will be written in His book of remembrance.