

For His Sense of Justice

Malachi 2:17-3:5

In September, 2000, Reuters News Service carried this report from New Zealand:

Apartment dwellers have a new weapon to use on noisy neighbors, with a New Zealand man recording a compact disc of 64 minutes of lawn mower noise.

“If your neighbors have a party Saturday night fairly late ... get up at 7 o'clock in the morning, put the hour of lawn-mowing sound on and go out to a cafe,” Wellington noise man and café owner Geoff Marsland said.

The astroturf-covered CD offers listeners general lawn-mower sounds along with feature moments such as the emptying of the catcher and stones hitting the blades.

“Five thousand of the CDs are on the market, of which more than 4,000 have been snapped up by local retailers,” Marsland said.

It is with good reason that God reserves matters of judgment and vengeance for Himself. Typically, the human heart is too jaded by self-interest to maintain perfect objectivity.

The repatriates in Jerusalem that had returned after seventy years in foreign captivity were anxious to regain the prosperity and national glory befitting God's chosen nation. They wanted God to punish those surrounding nations that had made things hard for them historically. They especially wanted Him to work over their most immediate neighbors who seemed to delight in the fact that they were barely getting by. So, they waited ... and they waited ... and they waited.

God was not responding on cue, so His people immediately began to question His fairness - a typical human response. Don't look inward at the sin barriers to communion with God that you have erected. Don't consider that God might have a more significant work in mind for your life than you do. Ignore the inspiration that you might give someone else who is facing hard times. No, the thing to do is to dwell on how bad things are for you and how good they seem to be for others and declare God “unfair.” It is to just such a grumbling spirit that Malachi now speaks.

I. A Grumbling Complaint against Divine Justice (2:17)

^{2:17}You have wearied the LORD with your words.

“How have we wearied him?” you ask.

By saying, “All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” or “Where is the God of justice?”

A. There Are Two Takes on this Complaint of God's Unfairness

1) Was this a Matter of Confused Moral Distinctions? (Pharasaic Hypocrisy?)

“All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” could mean that the Jews had so rationalized their sins that they no longer saw them as wrong. Today, we idealize attitudes and actions that if they were held up to the light of God's Word, would be exposed as sins. Ruthlessness is recast as drive and ambition. Harshness is recast as no-nonsense assertiveness. TV can take a story of adultery and present it as a romantic saga of true love. In recent years, some public figures have emerged from scandals more popular than ever because their indiscretions, lies or crimes make them seem “more human” to their fans and supporters.

Calling evil, “good,” excuses us. The best way to do wrong and maintain a clean conscience is to figure out a way for that which is wrong to not be wrong. Isaiah spoke to this in his day:

²⁰Woe to those who call evil good and good evil,
who put darkness for light and light for darkness,
who put bitter for sweet and sweet for bitter. – Isaiah 5:20

Trying to make a case that the game of golf is more spiritual than it really is, Leslie Nielsen asks:

“Who hasn't gone to the first tee with a little extra spring in his step, even at 6:30 in the morning, thrilled by the knowledge that the guy who edged him out of a parking space right by the bag drop has left his lights on?”

“And who can forget that sweet feeling of elation that comes over you as you discover that a member of that super-slow foursome in front of you that won't let you play through has left his sand wedge on the edge of the green, just a few short yards from the largest water hazard on the course?”

“Yes, there is a spiritual side to the game of golf.”

Of course, that still smacks a little bit of a sinful lust for vengeance. Remember, you golfers, good and evil are contrary notions. God's people will always do well to keep them straight.

2) Or, Was this a Matter of Cynicism towards God? (Jealous Self-pity)

“All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them” could also be taken as a complaint against God's unwillingness to punish the wicked. The Jews could see how bad their enemies were. Why didn't God? And, even more perplexing, why did it seem that He often actually made the wicked prosper more than His own people? Or, as Jeremiah once asked:

¹You are always righteous, O LORD, when I bring a case before you.
Yet I would speak with you about your justice:
Why does the way of the wicked prosper?
Why do all the faithless live at ease? – Jeremiah 12:1

God is not threatened when we raise questions about His justice on occasion. But, ultimately, the questions and the anger that can go with them need to give way to trusting His sovereignty.

B. There Is No Real Conflict between these Two Takes

“Where is the God of justice?” The Jews were longing for God to assert Himself against their foes. Whether this was because they saw themselves as more righteous than they really were or because they saw their enemies as more deserving of wrath than they really were is not important. The two miscalculations often go hand in hand. We tend to judge others more harshly than ourselves. We also tend to extend more pity and grace to ourselves than we do to others.

What the Jews failed to see was that they did not *REALLY* want “the God of justice” to reveal Himself. They wanted Him to pour out His wrath on those who had made life hard on them, but He needed to stop there. Had they examined themselves honestly, God's justice would have been the last thing they prayed for. They had acted indifferently towards a Father that had loved them. They had worshipped Him without passion. They had lightly regarded the vows of marriage they had sworn to the wives of their youth. Justice is the last thing they wanted.

No wonder Malachi accused the Jews of wearying the LORD. After all YAHWEH had brought them through, they were still reluctant to look at their own hearts. God was tired of their hypocrisy. He was tired of their mechanical worship. He was tired of their grumbling about fairness and justice rather than praising Him as they should for His faithfulness and provision.

II. A Great Conveyor of Divine Justice (3:1)

^{3:1}"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty.

A. This Coming One's Greatness Warranted a Forerunner

First, a messenger would "prepare the way" for the Lord Himself. This prophecy refers to John the Baptist, the cousin of Jesus, the son of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Matthew, Mark and Luke each quote this verse when they identify John and his mission to their readers.

Malachi alludes to his audience's expectation of a coming "Lord," someone pictured in prophecy as a king and shepherd, but the details were vague. A general delusion developed by John's day that *messiah* would drive the Romans from the land and reestablish Israel as a world power. Jesus would not fill that expectation, so in the wisdom of God, a forerunner, John, came to prepare the way for Jesus by disrupting those errant expectations. He did so by preaching spiritual repentance. Repentance and not prideful, nationalistic zeal was the appropriate way to prepare for the coming of messiah and the Kingdom of God that was at hand.

B. "Then Suddenly the Lord You Are Seeking Will Come"

This is a vivid announcement of the coming of Jesus in His role as the divine Judge of men. But, this brief text also discloses a number of other details about Jesus' identity.

His Godhood is alluded to. The people were crying out for the "God of justice" to come. The LORD's response was, "Be careful what you ask for. I am coming!" YAHWEH (God's covenant name represented by LORD) says, "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before *ME*." They were expecting YAHWEH Himself, and YAHWEH Himself said, "I am coming." But then, He adds that He will come as "the Lord you are seeking." Here "Lord" is *adon*, which means a superior or a master, or in other words, King Messiah. Essentially, Malachi has announced that in some way too mysterious for the original audience to grasp, the covenant God, YAHWEH (LORD), and the awaited *messiah* (Lord) are one and the same. It was a statement of the divine nature of Jesus.

This awaited Lord will come to "his temple," reinforcing that Jesus is one with God, for the temple was God's house. Jesus first appeared at the temple when he was dedicated as an infant. Even then, God had someone on hand to testify to the child's true identity. An elderly prophetess named Anna was there. When she saw the infant Jesus, "she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38). Also present was an old man named Simeon, who had been assured by God that He would not die until he had seen the *messiah*. Upon seeing the child, he broke into this song of praise:

²⁹"Sovereign Lord, as you have promised, you now dismiss your servant in peace.

³⁰For my eyes have seen your salvation,

³¹which you have prepared in the sight of all people,

³²a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to your people Israel." - Luke 2:29-32

Jesus would have many more conspicuous moments of impact in Jerusalem's temple. At age 12, He would be found questioning the teachers of the law with an insight beyond his years. Twice, He cleansed His temple by driving moneychangers and livestock merchants from its grounds. He spent much time, especially in His final days, teaching at the temple.

Finally, the text identifies Jesus as the "messenger of the covenant." In Jesus were fulfilled all the promises of the Old Testament. In Jesus, meaning was found for all the imagery of Old Testament worship, sacrifice and ritual. The sacrifice system of Moses simply looked ahead to the once for all sacrifice that Jesus would offer when He gave His life for us.

III. A Gracious Cleansing by the Divine Judge (3:2-4)

²But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

A. Jesus Will Purify a Holy Priesthood

Thus far in Malachi, many of God's grievances against His people have been directed at the priesthood. Now, the prophet speaks of a purification of the tribe of Levi (the priestly tribe) that Jesus will secure. A "refiner's fire" purged impurities from precious metals. An ancient "launderer's soap" was produced from the ashes of plants that grew near the Dead Sea. The high salt content was useful in the tedious work of scrubbing laundry by hand. The idea that the refiner will "sit" at his task emphasizes the tenacity and the thoroughness he gives to the process.

We established earlier in this study that as Christians, we are all priests. Through Jesus, God is making us holy. He does this by His Word, by our trials and by the fellowship of the saints. His thorough tenacity is reflected in Paul's assurance "that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose" (Romans 8:28).

B. Jesus Will Teach Us to Worship from the Heart

Worship planners continue the quest for the most meaningful possible worship experience:

- That was our contemporary service. Next is the traditional service, followed by the classical service, and a casual service with a sport's emphasis.
- "Something different today ... live musicians and a taped soloist."
- In this picture, you can tune in a channel with the style you prefer: Channel 1-Bach/Wesley; Channel 2-John Peterson; Channel 3-Praise songs.
- Pastor Linguist can never hear "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" without remembering his old youth group singing it to the tune of "Come On Baby, Light My Fire."

Through Jesus, worship will once again become a heart matter. Malachi speaks of the "offerings of Judah and Jerusalem" once again becoming acceptable. He is using language with which His audience is conversant. Repentance would enhance the worship of that original audience of Jews, but we must also expand this language to encompass the worship of the "new Jerusalem" or "spiritual Israel" which includes the church. All God's people will worship from the heart. Jesus would put this same promise in terms a Samaritan woman could understand. She noted that Jews worshipped in Jerusalem, but that Samaritans worshipped on Mount Gerazim. Jesus answered:

... ²³Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for they are the kind of worshipers the Father seeks. ²⁴God is spirit, and his worshipers must worship in spirit and in truth." - John 4:23, 24

Because of Jesus' work in us, we will all have the capacity to render worship to God that pleases Him. And, because it pleases Him, this worship will please us as well, not because of cutting edge presentation techniques or the latest song selections, but because sinful lives restored to God are being made holy, and worship genuinely draws them the heart of their heavenly Father.

IV. A Grievous Condemnation by the Divine Judge (3:5)

⁵"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.

A. Jesus Would Expose the Sins of the Unrepentant

The Bible never entertains the "disconnect" between faith and holy living that the proponents of "easy believism" seem to thrive on. God's work includes equipping us with grace that empowers us "to say 'No' to ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright and godly lives in this present age, while we wait for the blessed hope ..." (Titus 2:12, 13).

Malachi speaks of "sorcerers." In Babylon, the Jews were exposed to charms, amulets, incantations, exorcisms and the like. By the time of Jesus, many of the elders in various Jewish communities were well versed in these matters. Malachi speaks of "adulterers", meaning anyone who deviates from the pattern that God has established for family life. "Perjurers" were anyone who took the truth lightly, especially those who casually broke marriage vows and religious oaths. And of course, in a newly resettled land where most of the repatriates were barely getting by, laborers, widows, orphans and aliens were easy marks for exploitation by the rich.

For the sake of applying this text, any list of sins will do. Christ came not only to bring salvation, but to lead people out of the sins that plague them. To the Corinthians, Paul wrote:

⁹Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God? Do not be deceived: Neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders ¹⁰nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards nor slanderers nor swindlers will inherit the kingdom of God. ¹¹And that is what some of you were. But you were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God. – 1 Corinthians 6:9-11

Christ would come to cleanse His people from all of their sins, not to affirm them as "okay" in spite of them. True discipleship must always be marked by a progress out of sinful habits.

B. The Root of All Willful Sin Is Made Manifest

Again, any list of sins would do, for the root of all sin is just as Malachi states: They "do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty." Proverbs 1:7 says, "The fear of the LORD is the beginning of knowledge ..." If that is so, then the inverse is true as well; "To fail to fear the LORD is the heart of dumb." All humanity sins, but those in covenant with God continue to sin when they do not fear God quite to the same degree that they are enticed by temptation or self-interest.

I want to be realistic about this. It would be pious and false to suggest that we will ever master the fear of God leading to perfect sinlessness this side of the return of Christ. But, the authenticity of discipleship is proven by progress over time. Our ways must become lost in God's ways.