

From the Pulpit of Keith Miller
Northwest Church
October 9, 2005

A Tale of Two People Malachi 3:13 - 4:6

Introduction

We come to the very end of our Old Testament. We have seen a people characterized by indifference, ingratitude, carelessness, slander, and unrepentant hearts towards the awesome unchanging God who called them out of Egypt.

God has gone out of His way to explain to Israel her problem and has gotten little response. What we see in Malachi is that the hearts of Israel were far from Him; not all, but certainly the majority.

In the midst of Israel's cold and stubborn heart God promises a Refiner's fire who will come to purify a people unto Himself; we learned that that person is the Lord Jesus Christ.

We saw last week how God exhorted Israel and how God exhorts us that if we come to Him in repentance, he will come to us. How do we know that God will do this? Because His character does not change.

But now we come to verse 13 and God tells Israel, "*Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD.*" What words? These words: "*It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in morning before the LORD of hosts?*"

God told Israel what they needed to do to experience His blessing, but their response was, "why bother." Not only is their attitude one of indifference, they even accuse God of allowing the wicked to go unpunished: "*And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.*"

What we see in this final section in Malachi is how God boils the people down into two groups of people. What I would like to do this morning is figure out who the wicked are by spending the majority of our time looking at the righteous.

Who are the Righteous (vv. 16-18)

"Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ¹⁷ They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸ Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him."

The grammar of this passage is somewhat difficult in the Hebrew. When you look at it at first glance it seems like this is the response of some of those who were accusing God of allowing the wicked to go unpunished, but this is not what is happening in this passage. What we see here is Malachi is contrasting those in vv. 13-15 with those in v. 16.

Notice the question the people ask, “*What is the profit of keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? And now we call the arrogant blessed, Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.*”

[This accusation is no different than the one directed at Jesus by the religious leaders that the miracles He performed were done through the power of Satan.]

Now compare this statement with the first part of verse 16, “*On the other hand, those who feared the LORD spoke with one another: The LORD paid attention and heard them...*” What is it that those who feared Yahweh said?

You see, the attitude of those who feared God [God fearers] was quite different than those who question God in verses 14-15. These God fearers revered God’s name, reputation, and character. In other words, these God fearers had something the God criticizers did not have: a healthy fear of Yahweh and a heart to follow after Him.

What we see in verse 16 is that not all of Israel was guilty of careless worship, vain thinking, selfish love, or chintzy giving. There was a people in the midst of Israel who had a deep and abiding love for the LORD of hosts. The hearts of the righteous burned with passion for God and therefore God had drawn near to them. God paid attention to this group of people and heard their prayers.

But who are the Wicked (vv. 13-15)?

So let’s do some comparison and contrasting of vv. 13-15 with v. 16. What do we learn of the righteous verse 16...

- *They feared Yahweh:* they respected Him for who He was. They did not make any image of what they thought He should be like in their minds. They feared Him because of who He was and is...
 - Holy
 - Love
 - Wisdom
 - Sovereign
 - Just
 - Grace
 - Mercy
 - Unchangeable

- *They honored the name of Yahweh:* They acted in accordance to their understanding of Yahweh. They dared not bring a false accusation against God, they had a desire to see the reputation of God exhibited in their lives. Their fear and honor of God affected the way they lived their lives.

For much of Malachi there is a dialog between the people and Yahweh. What do we learn of these people?

- They questioned the love of God (1:2)
- They gave the poorest and cheapest of offerings to God (1:6-2:9)
- They were covenant breakers: with their spouses, neighbors, and with God (2:10-16).
- They were stingy in their giving (3:8-9)
- They were Gossips
- They questioned God's character (3:13-15)

Malachi contrasts the righteous in verse 16 with those of verses 14-15. Malachi never specifically calls the people of verses 14-15 wicked because He is more interested in showing them what characterizes the righteous.

What does the wicked look like? Let's look at Psalm 36,

"Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; there is no fear of God before his eyes. ² For he flatters himself in his own eyes that his iniquity cannot be found out and hated. ³ The words of his mouth are trouble and deceit; he has ceased to act wisely and do good. ⁴ He plots trouble while on his bed; he sets himself in a way that is not good; he does not reject evil."

God is appalled by wickedness, this is why we read in Proverbs 6:16-19 these stunning words,

"There are six things that the LORD hates, seven that are an abomination to him: ¹⁷ haughty eyes, a lying tongue, and hands that shed innocent blood, ¹⁸ a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that make haste to run to evil, ¹⁹ a false witness who breathes out lies, and one who sows discord among brothers."

These were some of the things many of the people of Israel were guilty of and if I may be so bold to say that there are those within Christ's church who are guilty of some of the same things: such as haughty eyes, a lying tongue, a heart that devises wicked plans, feet that run towards evil, the sowing of discord.

The people have been characterized by sin, but what we learn in Malachi 3:7, it doesn't have to be this way because God exhorts Israel, *"Return to me, and I will return to you."*

But the people cry out, "why bother." Why should we turn to righteousness when *"Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape"* (3:15)? Because God will deal with the evildoer; the wicked will not go unpunished, which leads to my next point...

How will the two people be distinguished?

Those who fear Yahweh and honor His name will be written into God's book of remembrance, which I believe is the book of life mentioned in Revelation 20:11-15. A fear and honor of God is not something a person creates out of his/her own power, but is something God creates in the heart of His people.

Now notice that not only is it the book of remembrance that distinguishes the righteous from the wicked, but it is also the value God places on the righteous: *“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.”*

God calls those who fear Him and honor His name His treasured possession, so what does that mean? Let me direct you to a couple of passages...

Deut. 7:6. *“For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth.”*

Psalms 135:3-6. *“Praise the LORD, for the LORD is good; sing to his name, for it is pleasant! ⁴ For the LORD has chosen Jacob for himself, Israel as his own possession. ⁵ For I know that the LORD is great, and that our Lord is above all gods. ⁶ Whatever the LORD pleases, he does, in heaven and on earth, in the seas and all deeps.”*

Not only does God consider the righteous whom He has chosen to be His treasured possession, but He mentions a third distinction between the wicked and those who are His; God goes on to say that He, *“will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.”* The word for *spare* in Hebrew (רָחַם) also can mean *to have compassion*. I think a better translation to this part of the verse is, *“I will have compassion on the righteous like a son.”*

The righteous will have no need to fear Yahweh in the day of judgment because they are as a son to Him. But not so for the wicked; look at Malachi 4:1, *“For behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and all evildoers will be stubble. The day that is coming shall set them ablaze, says the LORD of hosts, so that it will leave them neither root nor branch.”* This is the great white throne judgment; this is the experience of the lake of fire.

But not so of the righteous! No, the experience of the righteous will be likened to the calf who was at one time blinded by the danger of darkness in a dark cave, but now set free by the radiant beams of the sun. Look at verse 2, *“But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”*

So what is the sun of righteousness? Some think this is a direct reference to Jesus Christ, others think it is referring to the day of redemption. I like how one commentator explained this verse, *“As the rays of the sun spread light and warmth over the earth for the growth and maturity of the plants and living creatures, so will the sun of righteousness bring the healing of all hurts and wounds which the power of darkness has inflicted upon the righteous. Then they will go forth from the holes and caves, into which they had withdrawn during the night of suffering and where they had kept themselves concealed, and skip like stalled calves which are driven from the stall to the pasture.”*

But this does not help in deciphering who or what this sun of righteousness is does it? Let me tell you what I think, I think this sun of righteousness is both Jesus Christ and the day of Redemption that His death and victory over the grave will bring.

So yes, when the wicked are finally judged and the righteous are vindicated, the experience of the righteous will be likened to the calf released from the stall into the pasture. We will cry out with all our brother's and sister's in Jesus Christ, "*Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!*" This is what our entrance into glory will be like, but I think this passage means more than that.

The reason I feel this way is because of how Malachi closes his book in verse 4-6, "*Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶ And he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction.*"

Malachi closes with another prophetic word concerning this Elijah like character, who I believe is the same person Malachi 3:1 alludes too: the one who prepares the way for Jesus Christ. Now with that in mind, turn open to your Bibles to Luke 1:67-79. John the Baptist's father prophesies some things concerning his son, but what I want you to see is in verses 76-79,

"And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, ⁷⁷ to give knowledge of salvation to his people in the forgiveness of their sins, ⁷⁸ because of the tender mercy of our God, whereby the sunrise shall visit us from on high ⁷⁹ to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Did you see how Zechariah attributes the sunrise as someone who will visit earth? What is the very first thing Jesus says publicly to launch His ministry on earth? Hear what Luke 4:18 says, "*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed, ¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.*"

Do you see it? Do you see that Jesus is the Sun of Righteousness and the Sun of Righteousness is also the Day of Redemption that will dawn on the righteous? In other words, since Jesus came to this earth to die for our sins and conquer death by rising on the third day, the Sun of righteousness rose at His birth and has been rising ever since, and will continue to rise until the day of redemption.

The Sun of Righteousness will continue to rise until it reaches the climax of noonday brightness when His final appearing will divide the believing from the unbelieving. The wings of the Sun of Righteousness will bring healing when redemption is complete: no more sin, sickness, or slipping into death. This noon day climax of the Day of the LORD will never end with it submitting to the darkness of night, for the darkness will flee away and never return. Now that's worth dancing over!

Ok, I almost done. I just want to point out one more thing. Look again at Malachi 3:16-17, "*Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name. ¹⁷ "They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him."*

Now turn to Titus 2:11; notice the parallels with of Malachi 3 with this passage,
“For the grace of God has appeared, bringing salvation for all people,¹² training us to renounce ungodliness and worldly passions, and to live self-controlled, upright, and godly lives in the present age,¹³ waiting for our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior Jesus Christ,¹⁴ who gave himself for us to redeem us from all lawlessness and to purify for himself a people for his own possession who are zealous for good works.”

Those of us who have placed our faith and trust in Jesus Christ have been made the treasured possession of the God of the universe. We have not only been declared righteous in Jesus Christ, but we are being made righteous through the power of His Holy Spirit.

There is a calf in each of us waiting to be released if it hasn't been already. As recipients of the Salvation that is only possible through Jesus Christ, we can sing, *“Yahweh is my strength and my song; he has become my salvation. Glad songs of salvation are in the tents of the righteous...”*

There is a joy in the Salvation we have received in Jesus Christ; there is a calf in each and every one of you and given the right setting it will leap in joy and freedom.

Perhaps some of you are asking, “What is the point?” Why doesn't God just destroy Satan and get on with it? Because the purpose of the life we live now under the radiant beams of the Sun of Righteousness is to demonstrate the superior beauty and worth of Jesus Christ. Listen to how John Piper explains it in his book, *God is the Gospel* (pp 113-14).

“Perhaps you experienced this leaping calf when you first came to Christ but because of an unrepentant heart over the sin in your life it has been too long since you went about leaping from the stall of sin and bondage, maybe you never have experience leaping like a calf set free under the bright beams of the Sun of Righteousness because you have never experienced true conversion.”