

- To review, the prophet Malachi is the author, and the date of writing is around 460 BC or so, just before Ezra and Nehemiah arrive in Judah...this book is God's final word to his people before the New Testament age, and in it he challenges his people regarding their broken relationship with him...the setting is Jerusalem in the region of Judah, as the exiles who had returned from Babylon more than seventy years before were trying to rebuild their lives back in their land...at the moment, all of Judah remained under the control of the Medo-Persian empire...the 6th century BC was a tough time for God's people...
- In its structure, Malachi is unique...almost all the content is a series of six short dialogues called "disputations" between Yahweh and some or all of his people...Malachi records these from 1.2 to 4.3 in a series of conversations...careful of the chapter breaks, they're misplaced...I've grouped the text into four parts we'll cover on these dates...
- Tonight, we will look at disputations #4 and #5...we'll finish next week with the final disputation and the epilogue...tonight is quite a lot to cover, so let's get started!

"Where is the God of justice?"

- The people of Judah could have learned from a piece of advice given to me many years ago: "never miss an opportunity to say nothing"...¹⁷ **You have wearied the Lord with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"**
- This fourth, rather complex disputation begins with Malachi's statement that the people of Israel had worn God out with their talking...the word can mean to "trouble" someone...Calvin translated it as "saddened his spirit"...it is a needed reminder that the Lord takes note of all that we say...he knows our heart, so he would certainly know our words...the preacher of Ecclesiastes gave good counsel when he said, **Guard your steps when you go**

to the house of God. To draw near to listen is better than to offer the sacrifice of fools, for they do not know that they are doing evil. ² Be not rash with your mouth, nor let your heart be hasty to utter a word before God, for God is in heaven and you are on earth. Therefore let your words be few. (Ecclesiastes 5.1-2)...

- Their first complaint makes no sense, that God is pleased with the wicked...that has never been true...we've noted how the latter prophets often repeat truths from the former prophets, and we see that again here, as Israel's complaint against God reminds us of **Isaiah's** rebuke of Israel in **5.20**...

²⁰ **Woe (a curse) 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!

- The Lord does not delight in the wicked, but in the righteous...those who are so consumed by the ways of the devil that they would invert God's standard earn God's judgment and condemnation, not his praise...we cannot be fooled by thinking that earthly wealth alone means God is pleased with someone...when the wicked prosper, they are still the wicked...
- Worse is Israel's taunting question: **"Where is the God of justice?"**
- God answers, beginning in 3.1...

¹ **"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.**

- God's response to the question "where is the God of justice?" is "behold, I am here"...it wasn't God who left, but his people...

- They should have been more thoughtful before asking for the God of justice...justice always sounds good in the abstract...it's something we usually think of being applied to someone else...well, the God of justice is about to show up...
- Again, we see another example of the OT perspective of the Messiah...they only saw one advent, one coming of the Savior-King, not two...on this side of the cross, we see the two advents, the first of the Suffering Servant and the last of the Conquering King...and we also recognize the difference in the two “messengers” in verse 1...though the word is the same in Hebrew, ‘malaki’, the first is the forerunner of the Messiah, the one who **will prepare the way before me** ...we know him as John the Baptist...we will see more about the forerunner in chapter four next week...but for now let's look at this prophecy spoken by Jesus himself...**Matthew 11.7-10**...

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds concerning John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? A man dressed in soft clothing? Behold, those who wear soft clothing are in kings' houses. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written,

“Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.” (Malachi 3.1)

- But John was only the herald, the one to come before the true and great King...**And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.** If the forerunner was coming, the Lord himself would not be far behind him...he would no longer tarry, but would come to his people, to the very Temple in which the people of Judah worshipped in that day...

“Who can endure?”

- The question in Malachi’s mind was not if the Messiah was coming...the question was whether the people of Israel could survive it when he did...

² But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. ³ He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord. ⁴ Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.

- Jesus did come first as the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53, as we see in the New Testament, but Malachi sees not the savior but the judge, the Messiah who would cleanse his people from all their sin and iniquity, who would rescue them spiritually before he would rescue them physically...before their exaltation as the chosen people of God, they must first be refined in the crucible of suffering...this is similar to the oracles of Zechariah that told of the purifying of the nation...but the process will not be easy...the metaphors here tell the story
 - Jesus will be both the refiner and the fire that refines Israel by intense heat...refining metal through heating is called ‘smelting’...smelting furnaces work by heating the metals, such as gold and silver, to and past the melting point, then skimming off the impurities, or dross, as they rise to the top...the result is purified metal that eventually cools...this process was often repeated until the refiner was satisfied with the final product...the heat required is extreme: modern smelters operate at 2,200 F to 3,000 F degrees...in the first century, they would get them as hot as possible, likely around 1,200 to 1,300 F degrees...**Psalm 12.6** uses the same purity metaphor...**The words of the Lord are pure words, like silver refined in a furnace on the ground, purified seven times.**

- o The second metaphor is similar: Messiah will be to Israel as a fuller's soap...a fuller was someone who created, processed, and cleaned fabric and clothes, and the soap they used was a combination of lye, which itself was made up of water and hardwood ashes, and animal fat...it produced a strong, corrosive cleansing effect, and if wrongly used, could produce chemical burns...just as fuller's soap deep cleaned the dirt and impurities from cloth, so would God's judgment through the Messiah remove from Israel all uncleanness...
- o The meaning of both metaphors is obvious...God will require the people to undergo judgment to remove their sin and wickedness, as he prepares them to be a **kingdom of priests, a holy nation, God's treasured possession (Exodus 19.5-6)** as he intended from their beginning...
- It's meaningful that God uses silver as the example as he refers specifically to the Levitical priests...silver was the currency used for redemption, so the meaning seems to be that God will redeem the purposes of the priesthood, that again **they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.** ⁴**Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years.**
- God's purging of Israel will be designed to transform his people into a holy nation...
⁵**"Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.**
- The Lord names some of the sins of Israel as the reason for his judgment...God will be both the witness of the sin and the judge of the sin...sorcery, adultery, lying, and oppression stand as examples for all the many varied sins of the nation...but they could be summed up, as the Lord does here, in one: they **do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.**

- Paul may well have had this verse in mind when he wrote **Romans 3.9b-12**... **“...both Jews and Greeks, are under sin,¹⁰ as it is written: “None is righteous, no, not one;¹¹ no one understands; no one seeks for God.¹² All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”** Paul final stroke is this:¹⁸ **“There is no fear of God before their eyes.”**
- If you were to unwrap the motive and cause for every sin, reduce wickedness down to its essence, get to the core of all of man’s rebellious words and actions directed to the Almighty, I think it would come down to this: people do not fear God. It’s incomprehensible but true: even when faced with God’s judgment, some will not fear God and repent...
- So the end of God’s refining work is a purified nation, a people for his own possession...

Disputation #5: “You are robbing me”

- Having promised that his messenger of the covenant was coming, and that he, the Messiah himself, would refine and cleanse his people, God now calls his people to account for the state of their hard and greedy hearts...

⁶“For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed. ⁷From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’ ⁸Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. ⁹You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you.

- This is a call to repentance...**Return to me, and I will return to you**...which is a repetition of **Zechariah 1.3**, by the way...and it is said in a telling way...God asserts a fundamental divine attribute of himself, his immutability, his unchangeableness...and as an extension of his unchanging character, neither does his word change...but he charges the Jewish people

in very clear terms with being the “children of Jacob” – you will recall what Jacob was known for, even what his name meant, “deceiver”...here, God charges his people with following in their ancestor’s ways, trying to deceive God and cheating him out of that which was rightfully due him...

- Yet in grace, God calls them back to himself, insisting that they return in obedience to the law of the tithe...this requirement is a foundational law, and is related to many parts of the Jewish societal and religious life...the legal prescriptions are found in **Leviticus 27**, **Numbers 18**, and **Deuteronomy 14**, and **Nehemiah 10** records the pledges of the leaders and people to obey God’s command...of course, by the time of Jesus, many people were not observing the law at all, while the religious leaders observed it in the most minute and self-righteous ways possible, learning Jesus’s condemnation in **Matthew 23.23**...**“Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint and dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faithfulness. These you ought to have done, without neglecting the others.**
- Here in Malachi, the Lord calls the people to account for robbing him by not bringing in the full tithe, a tenth of all their agricultural produce...
- This disobedience can be corrected by obedience to his commands...

¹⁰ **Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.** ¹¹ **I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts.** ¹² **Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts.** You bring in the tithe to the storehouse and I will make sure you have all that you need...

- The Jewish tithe was fairly low compared to other taxes that are known from the period...it had three purposes:
 - It supported the Levites for their work in the Temple (**Numbers 18.21**)
 - It supported, in addition to the Levites, the sojourners (immigrants in the Jewish community), widows, and orphans (**Deuteronomy 14.28-29**)
 - And it supported a feast for God's people in His presence (**Deuteronomy 14.23**)
- For all of these purposes, the tithe poured back into the people...for spiritual ministry and instruction, for support for the most economically vulnerable of the people, and for community celebration...
- And yet, knowing this, the Jews of Malachi's day were still withholding their tithe...not only were the Jews robbing God, they were also, in a real sense, robbing themselves...the "storehouse" of verse 10 would support the Levites and their families, and the most vulnerable among them, and the celebrations...
- And famously, God urged the Jews to put him to the test to see if he would not greatly bless them if they would give as they should...crops would fully produce as God removed the "devourer," which is probably locusts or something like them, and vines would thrive without the pests that damage them...
- Normally, people "testing" God is not a good idea... **Deuteronomy 6.16** forbids it, and Jesus quoted that during his wilderness temptations to remind Satan that testing God is not OK...but here, God gives Israel permission to test him...God initiated the first "giving challenge" by telling Israel to obey him and watch the blessings come...and other nations would see these blessings, knowing they were from Israel's God, and glorify him...
- But here's a warning: don't take this passage out of context and perversely twist it...that's a favorite trick of prosperity gospel preachers...

Application

- As we think about how to wrestle with these truths, let's consider these questions...
- We are blessed if we know Jesus as the savior...but we must also reckon with Jesus as the righteous Judge...
 - Do you know Jesus Christ as your Savior and Lord?
 - You may well be born again...amen...but is every facet of your life – works, attitudes, words -- prepared for the judgment you will face as a believer? I've heard Christians say that they will never face judgment...that's true for our sins, for they are already forgiven by the blood of Jesus, but our works will certainly face judgment...
 - **II Corinthians 5.10, Romans 14.12, and I Corinthians 4.5** all speak to the judgment believers will face for rewards, but let's look at **I Corinthians 3.10-15** because it's so clear...¹⁰ **According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building upon it. Let each one take care how he builds upon it.** ¹¹ **For no one can lay a foundation other than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.** ¹² **Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—** ¹³ **each one's work will become manifest, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed by fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each one has done.** ¹⁴ **If the work that anyone has built on the foundation survives, he will receive a reward.** ¹⁵ **If anyone's work is burned up, he will suffer loss, though he himself will be saved, but only as through fire.**
- How are you prepared to face the Refiner's fire?
 - Keep the foundation – Jesus Christ – the basis for all we do
 - Be conscious of your motives
 - Serve well and faithfully

- How are we doing regarding our financial stewardship? What should our attitudes be about giving to the Lord?
 - As Gentiles, we are not under the Mosaic covenant; most of us are not agricultural producers, so we cannot tithe of our produce; we are not descended from Jacob, nor is there a Temple, nor is there a Levitical priesthood; so, we are not held to the OT law of the tithe...but...
 - In this NT age, we are not given some sort of OT percentage of income or produce...however, we are still responsible for two things: first, to rightly see the truth about God's character from the OT, and appropriately guide our conduct according to principles, not the law...but second, and more importantly, as Christ-followers, we are called to devote our entire lives – body, soul, and spirit, everything we are and everything we have – to the Lord Jesus Christ and his kingdom...not ten percent, but one hundred percent...
 - There are some principles for NT giving: 1) we are to give proportionally...I **Corinthians 16.2** says “**each of you is to put something aside and store it up, as he may prosper**” ...2) we are to give voluntarily and cheerfully...II **Corinthians 9.6-7** says “**The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷ Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver, ...3) our giving should tend toward generosity, not selfishness...II **Corinthians 8.1-8**... generosity should thrive even under affliction and being prompted by joy...if the needle has to move one way or the other, let it move toward giving not keeping...for your own heart's sake...**
 - We find one additional principle in part of Jesus's teaching following the parable of the unjust steward in **Luke 16.10**...¹⁰ “**One who is faithful in a very little is also**

faithful in much, and one who is dishonest in a very little is also dishonest in much. Our circumstances don't determine our generosity, our character does...when you are giving, consider what it reveals about your character...

- o Our closing thought tonight is about how we see our resources and how God sees them...it comes from author Randy Alcorn in his book, "The Treasure Principle":
"God comes right out and tells us why He gives us more money than we need. It's not so we can find more ways to spend it. It's not so we can indulge ourselves and spoil our children. It's not so we can insulate ourselves from needing God's provision. It's so we can give – generously. When God provides more money, we often think, "this is a blessing." Well, yes, but it would be just as scriptural to think, "this is a test." Amen.