

Truth for Today

The Bible Explained

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Malachi - The Dangers of Spiritual Blindness: Wrong perspectives (Malachi 3:13-18)

Have you ever heard a child with that wonderful statement "It is just not fair!"? I am sure we all have. My three children are still a little too young to use it but I can see it is not too far off being uttered! When that particular phrase is used, it is nearly always in a situation which is actually more than fair and, as it is usually after some form of correction, quite justified. My wife has recently started watching a documentary about schools on television. I see bits of the program and some of the behaviour and attitude of the children is pretty bad, but what I always find interesting is that they just don't see how badly behaved, or rude, they are being. Inevitably some kind of outburst is made about the injustice of their treatment. Alas, although they may feel that they are completely in the right, most viewers will watch it knowing that they are just plain wrong, a wonderful example of someone having a completely wrong perspective of their performance and behaviour.

In our talk today, we are continuing a short path through Malachi. This particular part considers just six verses of Malachi 3; the last six as it happens, Malachi 3:13-18. There is a little bit of the behaviour I have already mentioned demonstrated in the passage before us. I have always found Malachi a very interesting book. It always strikes me as a bit of a report card at the end of the Old Testament. God effectively reviews the behaviour and efforts of the nation of Israel. Rather interestingly, God inserts the opinions of the people into his report. Although it may seem a chance to "put their side of the story," it only serves God's purpose in demonstrating how badly things have been going. Our title for this talk is "Wrong Perspectives". This is very much the case here. The people protest and bring their case and feel so sure that they are right. God shows it to be nothing but wrong, and ultimately, fatal.

Let us remind ourselves of the verses we are considering today, Malachi 3:13-18: *"Your words have been harsh against Me," says the LORD, "Yet you say, "What have we spoken against You?" You have said, "It is useless to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts? So now we call the proud blessed, for those who do wickedness are raised up; they even tempt God and go free." Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another, and the LORD listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the LORD and who meditate on His name. 'They shall be Mine,' says the LORD of hosts, 'On the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him.' Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him" (Malachi 3:13-18).*

If we break down Malachi 3:13-18, we see that they nicely split into two parts. The first three verses, Malachi 3:13-15, are the conclusion of the review of the performance of Israel. In this final condemnation of their performance, they have effectively said there is no point following God, just do what is best for you. The latter three verses, Malachi 3:16-18, give us a short review of the Remnant of Israel and God's faithfulness to them. However, it is actually an answer to the wrong statements made by the people about the ways of God.

So, let us look at the wrong perspectives in Malachi 3:13-15. As I have said, this is the final and worst charge that God has against the people. The people effectively say it is not worth it. If you follow God's ways, your life will just be hard. Only those people who do evil do well in life. Not only that, but God is actually complicit in this and is actually the power behind such outcomes! What a warped view this is to say that God effectively is punishing those who follow His ways, despite the fact that He has commanded them to do so! Indeed God can say that their words have been harsh towards Him.

Fundamentally the people have a completely wrong perspective of God and this is brought out in Malachi 3:14-15. They have forgotten whom they are speaking about and have levelled God's thinking to their own and assumed His thinking is just as twisted. When looking at these Malachi 3:14-15 I have come up with five different ways in which they have the wrong perspective about God and I will just spend a little time working through them now.

The first point that I would like to make is that the people feel that they are deserving of something. They say, *"It is useless to serve God"*, which implies an expectation of reward or blessing from God. Their attitude is that God is there and if I put even the smallest bit of effort in then He should give me everything I could desire. This assumes that God is there for our benefit. Remarkable that this is the thought they have towards the Creator of this whole universe, the

One who holds our very lives in His hands. Imagine if our cars were to start demanding the location we want to get to. Imagine if because they had started running properly last Tuesday, they then expected that their every whim could be met. I know this is a bit of a silly analogy as we are certainly not like mere cars to God, but the point perhaps does give a little bit of appreciation of the nonsense that is in their statement. God owes us nothing. He is all in all and a righteous and holy God. His consideration towards us, and His willingness to bless and show us love and grace is His choice and certainly not because we have done anything to earn it. Consider these verses:

Isaiah 64:6: *"But we are all like an unclean thing, and all our righteousnesses are like filthy rags; we all fade as a leaf, and our iniquities, like the wind, have taken us away."*

Now Ephesians 2:4-5: *"But God, who is rich in mercy, because of His great love with which He loved us, even when we were dead in trespasses, made us alive together with Christ (by grace you have been saved)."*

These are two passages, and more could have been chosen, which clearly state that God does not work because we deserve anything, but because of who He is and His love for us.

Of course, we could go further than this to demonstrate how wrong this assumption is by saying that in fact God has consistently shown His willingness to do wonderful things for His people. The Old Testament is filled with examples of God intervening for His people against their enemies, despite an almost continuous track record of disobedience against the ways of God.

This point leads nicely onto my second way in which the perspective of the people is wrong. The assumption made here is that the people, who were supposedly following the ways of God, were doing so correctly. I think not!

Now, my evidence to back this up is twofold. Firstly, we have the previous two chapters of Malachi to help. God lays down all of the ways in which they not only were not doing things correctly They were in fact short changing God in every way. Their service towards God was mere lip service, doing things to keep up appearances rather than actually being concerned to please the Creator of the universe.

Secondly, the argument made in our section, Malachi 3:13-18, contains that remarkable phrase that the people have *"walked as mourners before the LORD."* This statement shows the real feeling that they had towards following God's ways - as mourners. They feel it is so awful for them to have to do it that it can be compared to the feeling that you are living in the light of someone recently having died! Following God's ways has been such a burden according to them. A real sacrifice to spend a relatively small amount of time giving thanks to God. Nobody wants someone to do the things they ask grudgingly and this is certainly the case with God.

The people were following the ways of God badly and what they were doing was done very grudgingly. This is no service at all! This is no respect to one who cares for His people. Although the people thought they were on better moral ground than those whom they quote at the end of Malachi 3:15, they are actually failing as much in following God.

I now move onto my third point by quoting 1 Samuel 15:22: *"So Samuel said: 'Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams.'"*

Considering again the thought that the people said they walked as mourners, this statement suggests that there was a feeling that their quality of service towards God was down to how much they felt they had suffered in doing so. They were more concerned about the impact it had on them rather on whether or not it was what God wanted. This is the reason for my quote in 1 Samuel. God's point to Samuel was that the quantity, quality or effort of service for God is not what is being sought. It is the basis behind it that is important. Our efforts are not needed by God, but He is pleased to receive service if it is because people want to do something for Him. It is a remarkable thing to think that our feeble efforts may be pleasing to God simply because we have a desire to please Him. This is the basis behind the story of the widow with two pennies in Mark 12:41-44 and Luke 21:1-4. It is the basis behind the statement by the Lord when He said, *"whoever gives you a cup of water in My name ... shall by no means lose his reward"* found in Mark 9:41.

Maybe the people had suffered; I do not know. There is no acknowledgement or dispute given here. But the fact that it is part of this false statement shows they had no thought about their relationship with God, but again, that they thought they would receive immediate reward for their efforts.

I find this point difficult to put in an easy way but in trying to do so I look at my relationship with my wife as a bit of an example. I do things for her and my family because I love them. I could argue that I suffer as a result. I can't go and do all of the things I may like to do whenever I want to, or I don't have as much time or freedom from responsibilities any more. I don't have this mindset because I know that I gain more from the relationship I have and I enjoy doing these

things because it makes the whole family happy. If I didn't have this thought, I would simply feel I ought to be compensated for my efforts and supposed losses. I feel this is what the people were thinking and they were so sure of the value of their efforts. Forgetting who God is, they felt that they were owed something by God.

Let us move on to my fourth point for Malachi 3:13-15. The people thought success was based upon how well things were going in their lives at that moment. The mindset was that if my life is going well, God is blessing me, and if my life is going badly I am being punished by God. The thought is very much based upon the here and now, with material condition the gauge of success. Such thoughts are very limited and only consider the life that we have now. As we look back to these people, think how futile their thoughts were. They were so keen on having success and wealth in this world. As we consider Malachi 3:13-15, let us think how much value that really was. These people are long dead, all of their possessions are dust most likely, we do not even know their name. We would probably look at their quality of life as rather low and not something we would want to endure. Yet it was what they strived for and they felt that to obtain it would be the culmination of God's blessing for them.

Having the mindset that these people had naturally causes resentment and bitterness to come in because this world is not fair in general. Psalm 73 is an excellent example of this kind of thinking. Asaph, the writer of Psalm 73, describes his despair as he sees around him all the evil people doing well and living life to the full. His viewpoint was very much like those in Malachi 3:13-18. However, when Asaph is before God in the sanctuary, he remembers who God is and that He is looking beyond this life. Psalm 73:17 states, "*Until I went into the sanctuary of God; then I understood their end.*" He is reminded that God is interested in our condition beyond this short life and is more concerned with eternal things.

The perspective of the people in Malachi was all wrong. They saw God only as a means to improve their lives now rather as someone who had their long term future in view. Sadly, they viewed God as someone who could be convenient for them in reaching their goals in life. God was actually compassionately trying to bring these people to Himself in order to enjoy the many blessings He was willing to bestow. The people effectively tried to bring God down to their level rather than let Him lead them to His. As a result they wanted the easy lives of those who practised evil, without seeing that an easy short life here without God would ultimately lead to an eternity of terrible consequences.

This leads me to my fifth and final point on Malachi 3:13-15. The people had come to that shocking conclusion that following God was a bad thing. It was better not to follow Him. I don't want to say much on this point except to say that such a viewpoint is not only wrong but it actually is a condemnation of the character of God Himself, something that is very serious indeed. We see similar attitudes shown to Jesus in His life where people accused Him of being evil or even the devil when He was going around doing good.

Now my five points are concluded with regard to our first few verses. We now turn to a happier section of our passage as the answer is given to the statements we have already considered. This is another one of those wonderful little sections that appear in the books of the Old Testament prophets. Many of them are full of rather depressing passages of condemnation, like the ones we we have just been looking at. But we always seem to get these encouraging and remarkable statements which give us a glimpse of God's care and love now, as well as the glorious future for those who belong to God. Our passage, Malachi 3:13-18, although short, does not disappoint in this respect. So what does God say about those who belong to Him:

- He is interested in them, listening and paying attention to their concerns;
- He keeps a record of them so that they will be remembered;
- He claims them for Himself as a treasure; and
- He brings them to such a relationship that they are like sons.

What a contrast to their accusations made against God! He here reveals not only that it is worth following the ways of God, but that the rewards are great indeed. The position that He provides for His people is one of being cared for and loved by God, a high place of privilege and blessing in His thoughts and plans. We can see in these verses the real plan that God has for His people; how it is so much better than simply having a good life here on this earth. Every natural life goal is provided in these statements, and provided for eternity! God shows His care and interest in His people. He provides a lasting legacy for His people and He provides that close bond of family that is so important in our lives. God provides the things that we crave and does so in abundance. These are the things that He has wanted to provide for mankind since the creation and He continues to declare it now even at this low point for His people.

What a God we have who is willing to provide this despite our failings! Of course, this is the essence of the Christian Gospel. This wonderful salvation is based around the Lord Jesus and His work at Calvary. Here the Lord provided, through His sacrificial death, the means for all of these wonderful blessings to be available to us. This again shows how amazing God's thoughts are towards those that belong to Him. He provides this freely through the work of Jesus rather than through our efforts. Indeed their wrong perspectives have been demonstrated in our passage.

It is worth pointing out here as well the final statement in our passage which states that they will know the difference between the righteous and the wicked, those who follow God and those who do not. Firstly the statement is such that it implies that the two descriptions are linked. Therefore the righteous are those who follow God and the wicked are those who do not. Secondly, it is a clear statement that there is no middle ground with regard to these things. People are either followers of God or they are not. Therefore, the wonderful things God has in store for those who follow Him, as described in Malachi 3:16-17, are not provided for those who reject God's ways. The wrong perspective is clearly shown by those who accused God in our passage today.

I would now like to take a little bit of time to look at the relevance for Malachi 3:13-18, our passage today in our lives. After all, this was written several hundred years before the birth of Jesus. Are such statements still relevant and something we can learn from? I would say an emphatic "Yes!" We hear statements like those of the people in Malachi's time in our society today. The specifics may be a little different as well as the focus of the topics, but the general outcome is the same: it is not worth following the ways of God. Here are some topics where we might hear such statements being made:

- There is no God, there is nothing after we die, so what is the point?
- People say that they went to church every Sunday but some things didn't work out how they wanted in life, so it was all a waste of time.
- People feel that following God will mean they will miss out on fun things or stop them enjoying life, so it is not worth doing.
- People now say that following God's ways is actually wrong and evil. Our more knowledgeable and liberal society, they claim, is actually morally better.

I am sure we have heard statements made about these things and there are many more topics I am sure. In fact, people have gone so far wrong in their wrong perspectives that they have dismissed God entirely. Even the people in our passage hadn't dismissed God entirely; they had just decided His character was not what it actually is. The wrong perspectives today are now directed at followers of God because there is a denial about God Himself.

So we can see that our passage is relevant today as there is just as wrong a perspective about God as there was then, perhaps even more so. The risk for those of us who follow God's ways now is that we may get swayed or influenced by the wrong perspectives that are prevalent today. We may indeed begin to say that perhaps the Bible isn't always correct or that other things may be more worth taking note of. Perhaps we begin to think that our cultures are more important, or perhaps even that Christianity must keep up with the times. I am not one who necessarily holds to traditions, but there should never be compromise when it comes to the clear instructions in the word of God. If we follow God, we must be those who fear Him and realise the real end for those who do not. There is an end game that we must keep in sight where we see the long term purposes of God and not just our surrounding circumstances. When we have that perspective, we will see what God has done for us, how He cares for us and what He has planned for us.

I hope these considerations today have helped to see some of the key messages that this often neglected Old Testament book contains. I also hope that each of us has indeed got the correct perspective and can see the truth in the last verse of our passage: *"Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him"* (Malachi 3:18).

Thank you for listening to the *Truth for Today* talk on "Malachi, the dangers of Spiritual blindness - Wrong Perspectives."

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