

This morning is the fourth Sunday in Advent, the season that leads us right up to Christmas, and I am in the last week of my sermon series through the book of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament. Malachi is a prophetic book by genre, which means that as the people of Israel were falling away from faithfulness to God, that God raised up Malachi as a prophet, to be God's mouthpiece, to confront the people with their sins and call them to repent, to turn back to faithfulness to God. That means that you are going to find that this book, like most prophetic books, is very direct and confrontational in its style. It is meant to make those whose lives are not lining up with God's design very uncomfortable when they hear it. I believe that if you are willing to listen to what God has to say through Malachi, that you will be challenged as well.

In chapter 1, God's main message through his spokesperson Malachi is that His people are not honoring God, but are giving Him their leftovers, their scraps. They do not take his holiness seriously, nor do they take their sins seriously. Instead, they are bringing offerings to God that are not the best, not what God has required of them. In chapter 2, God gives Malachi a harsh word for the spiritual leaders in their community, and then confronts men who are divorcing their wives and marrying women who serve foreign gods. Last week we looked at chapter 3, where God has some strong words about justice, money, and a promise about the coming Messiah.

This week, we will be finishing up Malachi, looking at 3:13 – 4:6, which deals with a critical question. Let's begin with verses 13-15:

***Malachi 3:13-15*** - *"You have said harsh things against me," says the LORD. "Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?' <sup>14</sup> "You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?' <sup>15</sup> But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape."*

Remember that the book of Malachi is organized around a series of disputes, where God makes a statement or an accusation, the people question him, and God gives His answer. In this final section, we see that the people say "It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty?" Futile is another word for pointless. In other words, what do we get out of serving the Lord? What is the benefit of following God? What is in it for me? First of all, they say, it feels like work and drudgery, carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners. Secondly, those who are not following Him seem better off. The arrogant and evildoers prosper and God

does nothing about it. We are getting nothing out of this. We feel like we are suffering and not prospering, while those who do not follow God are thriving. Why do we bother believing in God and serving Him?

So, how would you answer this question? Why do you follow God? Or, if you don't, why not? Is it futile, pointless, meaningless, to serve God? If not, then what do we get out of it?

There are many things I could say in response to this, but let's look at how God responds to the contention that it is useless to serve Him. Why is it not futile to serve God? There are three things in particular that God says in response, beginning in v. 16:

*<sup>16</sup> Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. <sup>17</sup> "They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.*

### 1) Everything you do matters eternally

In verse 16, those who still serve God talk with each other, and in response, we read that a scroll, or a book of remembrance is written concerning those who still serve and honor God. I believe this scroll is a record of the righteous, what the righteous had done and what they had endured, and it is shared with them so that they would know that their faithfulness would not be forgotten. Their faith and trust in God matters, and will matter eternally.

Why is it not futile to serve the God? The first reason is that everything you do matters eternally. This is such a critical answer to the question of whether it is futile or meaningless to serve and follow God. At some point in life, or sometimes at many points, most people step back and ask themselves, what is it all for? We even have a term for it: midlife crisis. Half my life is gone, and what do I have to show for it? Have I truly lived my life rightly? All my life I've been climbing the ladder, and one day I wake up and question whether the ladder has been leaning against the wrong wall all along.

These kind of questions about meaning and purpose are appropriate to ask. Does what you are doing really matter? Will they be remembered? Because the reality is that if there is no God, then in the end you will die, eventually you will be

forgotten, and this will all have been for nothing. After all, if we are just the product of evolution, of natural selection and random mutation, then in the end, our lives will not have any lasting significance. We are here by accident, and one day we will die, anyone who remembers us will also die, and eventually the world will cease to exist, and all of this will be forever forgotten and meaningless.

As the evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould, who died in 2002, put it: *“We are here because one odd group of fishes had a peculiar fin anatomy that could transform into legs for terrestrial creatures; because the earth never froze entirely during an ice age; because a small and tenuous species, arising in Africa a quarter of a million years ago, has managed, so far, to survive by hook and by crook. We may yearn for a ‘higher answer’ – but none exists”*

If there is no God, then in the end it will not have mattered if you were Mother Teresa or a murderer, if you loved your family well or treated them terribly. If there is no God, in the end you will be forgotten and all of this will eventually come to an end.

But the reality is that there is a God, and everything you do has eternal significance. **And so, is it futile to follow God? No, the exact opposite! It is ALL meaningful.** Consider:

**Matthew 10:42** - *And if anyone gives even a cup of cold water to one of these little ones because he is my disciple, I tell you the truth, he will certainly not lose his reward.”*

Jesus says that every little act of service done in the name of God will be eternally rewarded.

**1 Corinthians 3:11-15** - *For no one can lay any foundation other than the one already laid, which is Jesus Christ. <sup>12</sup> If any man builds on this foundation using gold, silver, costly stones, wood, hay or straw, <sup>13</sup> his work will be shown for what it is, because the Day will bring it to light. It will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test the quality of each man's work. <sup>14</sup> If what he has built survives, he will receive his reward. <sup>15</sup> If it is burned up, he will suffer loss; he himself will be saved, but only as one escaping through the flames.*

Paul writes that those whose lives are built on the foundation of Jesus will escape the fire of God’s judgment on that last day when we stand before Him. And if we have built upon that foundation for His glory, then it will last forever and be

eternally rewarded. And it is because of the hope of the resurrection, of life after death, that he writes later in that letter:

*1 Corinthians 15:58 - Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain.*

Why is it not in vain? Because death is not the end. Because everything you do for God and in service to others will matter eternally.

The people in Malachi's day were complaining that it was futile, meaningless to follow God because they were not seeing the worldly rewards that they were hoping for. They were not experiencing prosperity and peace. **But the reality is that true futility and meaninglessness is found in a life apart from God, because in the end it will have amounted to nothing.** But for those who are in Christ, there is a scroll of remembrance – what you do and who you are will be remembered and rewarded – and everything matters eternally.

*<sup>16</sup> Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. <sup>17</sup> "They will be mine," says the LORD Almighty, "in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. <sup>18</sup> And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.*

## **2) You are perfectly loved despite your flaws**

Those who trusted in the Lord are called His treasured possession. They will be spared from judgment, despite their sin and their flaws.

Why is it not futile to follow God, even if you can't see the worldly rewards you were hoping for? Not only does your life matter eternally, but you know that you are loved despite your flaws. Maybe you don't realize how critical this is, but take a minute to think about it. This is the plot of just about every Hollywood love story or romantic comedy. Girl meets boy. Girl and boy fall in love. But girl has a shameful secret, and she is afraid that if the boy finds out about her secret, the he will reject her. And then finally the boy finds out secret, and rejection seems to be the outcome. But wait! After a time apart, he accepts her and chooses to love her despite her secret! And they live happily ever after. What does that plot say about

the longing of our heart? **I think it tells us that we long for someone to see the deepest, ugliest parts of us and instead of rejecting us, to love us as we are.** It tells us that one of our deepest fears is that if people knew the real us, they would run screaming and we would be alone and unloved. It's why we so often hide the truth and try to present our best side, even from the ones who love us the most. It's why even though someone might love us, we still don't really know if they would love us if they knew everything about us.

But one of the benefits of knowing and following God is that this question is settled once and for all. The gospel message is that the God who knows you better than you know yourself, from whom you can hide nothing, saw all your sin and ugliness and instead of rejecting and condemning you, loved you enough to die for you.

***Romans 5:6-8*** - *You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. <sup>7</sup> Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous man, though for a good man someone might possibly dare to die. <sup>8</sup> But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.*

Think about it. How do you know that you are valuable? How do you know how much anything is worth? Why is Honus Wagner's baseball card worth \$3.12 million? The worth of something depends upon how much someone is willing to pay for that item. And the God of the universe was willing to give His Son for your life. That is how much you are worth. You are loved by the one who knows you better than anyone and the one whose opinion matters more than anyone else's.

When we know that we are loved and worth that much, it changes everything about how we interact with others, because we do not need to enter the world from a place of neediness and fear. We don't need to expect another person to fulfill our longing for perfect love and affirmation. We can enter relationships and this world from a place of security and self-worth that can never be taken away. But there is no such promise for those who reject the Lord. The best they can hope for is to find someone in this world who will love them until they are parted by death. That is futility for the majority of the world. But not so for us:

***Romans 8:31-32*** - *What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? <sup>32</sup> He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?*

We can rest, knowing that God gave us His Son when we were His enemies, and will give us all that we need, because of His great love for us. Is it futile to serve the Lord? Absolutely not! So far, we see that in Christ, our lives matter eternally and we find in Him the love and assurance of our worth that everyone is searching for. But that is not all:

*"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and that day that is coming will set them on fire," says the LORD Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. <sup>2</sup> But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall. <sup>3</sup> Then you will trample down the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day when I do these things," says the LORD Almighty.*

### 3) You, and this world, will be healed

God continues with some strong words about the difference between what will happen to the wicked and to the righteous, those whose trust is in Him, who revere His name. He says that in the end, there will be a day of judgment, where all that is evil will be destroyed, and all who have rejected Him receive the punishment that their sins deserve, but that for those who know Him, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings, they will be filled with an inexpressible joy, and there will finally be justice in the world.

**This life is hard.** And the longer you live, the more you are beaten down by suffering, by loss, by aging. Apart from God, what is the best you can hope for? That you won't suffer too badly before you become extinct? Talk about futility and meaninglessness. But for those who trust in the Lord, even aging is not futile, because every day brings you closer to your ultimate healing.

**2 Corinthians 4:16-18** - *Therefore we do not lose heart. Though outwardly we are **wasting away**, yet inwardly we are being renewed day by day. <sup>17</sup> For our light and momentary troubles are achieving for us an eternal glory that far outweighs them all. <sup>18</sup> So we fix our eyes not on what is seen, but on what is unseen. For what is seen is temporary, but what is unseen is eternal.*

And this is why Paul can say:

**Philippians 1:21** - *For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.*

In fact, in the final chapter of the Bible, we find this same promise of healing:

**Revelation 22:1-2** - *Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb <sup>2</sup> down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations.*

And in the previous chapter:

**Revelation 21:3-4** - *And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. <sup>4</sup> He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away."*

Few things would be more futile or meaningless than to not only suffer but to feel like the suffering you endure in this life is for nothing, just meaningless pain until you cease to exist. But the good news is that there is complete healing for those who know God. There will be **shalom**, the Hebrew word that means peace and wholeness. First with God, as our sins are forgiven and we are declared righteous, right with God. Secondly, peace and wholeness within ourselves – profound psychological and emotional peace; no wonder he writes that we will go out and leap like calves released from the stall, for we will have joy beyond anything this world could ever offer. Thirdly, we will have peace with each other. Hostilities will cease, and justice will reign as the wicked are destroyed and the righteous live in perfect shalom. And lastly, there will be peace with nature, as we are right with the world. This is the promise of what is in store for those who trust in the Lord.

So, is it futile to serve the Lord, just because we don't experience worldly rewards? By no means! In Christ we find a life that is eternally meaningful. We find the love our hearts have been longing for that sets us free from fear and neediness. And we find the healing, the peace, the shalom that our hearts and this world is longing for.

So how do we receive this? How does this reality become part of our lives?

<sup>4</sup> *"Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel. <sup>5</sup> "See, I will send you the prophet Elijah before that great and dreadful day of the LORD comes. <sup>6</sup> He will turn the hearts of the fathers to*

*their children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers; or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."*

God begins with an exhortation to turn back to the law of Moses. Remember that the purpose of the prophet was to call the people back to the covenant and back to a right relationship with God. And then he tells them that he will send Elijah before the Lord comes. And he will bring reconciliation.

Remember the prophecy given by the angel to Zechariah in Luke 1 about his son, who would come to be known as John the Baptist:

***Luke 1:16-17*** - *Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup> And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous-- to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."*

And Jesus confirms that John the Baptist was the one who came in the spirit of Elijah:

***Matthew 17:9-13*** *As they were coming down the mountain, Jesus instructed them, "Don't tell anyone what you have seen, until the Son of Man has been raised from the dead." <sup>10</sup> The disciples asked him, "Why then do the teachers of the law say that Elijah must come first?" <sup>11</sup> Jesus replied, "To be sure, Elijah comes and will restore all things. <sup>12</sup> But I tell you, Elijah has already come, and they did not recognize him, but have done to him everything they wished. In the same way the Son of Man is going to suffer at their hands." <sup>13</sup> Then the disciples understood that he was talking to them about John the Baptist.*

At Christmas, the Lord came to bring salvation, a way to be made right with God, to escape the futility of this world and find a life of eternal significance, perfect love, and everlasting healing, justice and joy. And one day you will stand before God, either because you have died or because He had returned again. All throughout this section has been a clear warning that there will be a dividing between the righteous and the wicked. And that line will not be between the good and bad or the lawbreakers and lawkeepers. It will be those whose trust is in the Lord, who have received salvation from the Lord who is coming to his people.

I do not want you to live a meaningless life. I do not want you to live your life never knowing if you are loved, never knowing your value. And I do not want you living thinking that your suffering is meaningless, or that there will never be an end



to the injustice of the world. It is not futile to serve the Lord, but it is futile, eternally meaningless, to live your life without Him. Sure, you can do your best to create your own meaning in life. But objectively speaking, apart from God there is no true meaning. Please know that true futility and meaninglessness is found in a life without God. But because of Jesus, there is meaning in life. There is eternal meaning to our lives, there is the love our hearts have been looking for, and there is healing, peace, and shalom. Come to Jesus this Christmas.

If you have never made a decision to follow God, pray this with me:

*Jesus, I want my life to have eternal significance, and I believe that is found in knowing you. I believe that in you is found eternal life, life to the full. I believe that apart from faith in you, I will die in my sins, separated from God for all eternity. But I believe that you love me so much that you died on the cross in my place, taking the penalty for my sin, and that you rose from the grave, conquering death. I turn from my sinful, self-centered way of life and I trust in you as my Savior and Lord, and commit my life to you today. Amen.*