

MBC – 7/12/2020 – Pastor Doug Thompson

“You Shall See the Distinction Between the Righteous and the Wicked”

Malachi 3:13–4:6

We finish our study of Malachi this morning. I have loved immersing myself in this book. The nation of Judah had been in captivity for 70 years, taken away as punishment from God by Nebuchadnezzar, when God raised up King Cyrus of Persia to decree that the exiles could return to their homeland (538 B.C.). 50,000 Jews returned. They rebuilt the temple and the city walls, but when Malachi arrives on the scene the people are in a spiritual desert: Worship was a chore, men were divorcing their wives and married pagan women, and the giving had dried up so that the priests had to work side jobs to support themselves. So God charges the people with their sins in 6 disputations. And their response was to talk back to God! They question His motives, they doubt His love, they are cynical about His justice.

- They spoke hard words against Him, so God speaks hard words to them, but we see over and over that He only warns them that He might bless them! Beloved, whenever you feel the stab of guilt, whenever your sins are exposed – that’s mercy! He wants to get you back on track Thank God, because *“the kindness of God leads you to repentance.”*

This morning we look at His final charge against His people. He pronounces judgment on the faithless, *but* He also announces the final vindication of His faithful remnant.

And God’s last Word to His people in the OT is a word of hope – the “Sun of righteousness” is coming! Let’s read it together—

- Malachi 3:13–4:6 ¹³“Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ ¹⁴You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? ¹⁵And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.” ¹⁶Then 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. ¹⁸Then 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. ¹⁹For 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. ²⁰But 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. ²¹And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says

the LORD of hosts. ⁴“Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel. ⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And 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.”

And what’s the very next thing you read in your Bibles?

- Matthew 1:1 ¹The book of the genealogy of Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Abraham.

Pray

Intro: *Don’t confuse life with God.*

This might be the most important message from this series on Malachi because the Holy Spirit is reminding us that in these last days, we must live by faith, not by sight. Sight tells us that our world is falling apart – right? The bad people are winning. They’re taking over, and getting away with it. God’s people are naive losers. “It is vain to serve God, what is the profit?” Don’t you feel like that sometimes? When God doesn’t seem to answer your prayers? Might as well have your ‘Best Life Now.’ Eat, drink, and be merry, right?

But *faith* tells us a whole different story: God’s Word says, expect suffering now – but incomparable glory later. God’s Word says our Best Life is the next life, not this life. Beloved, Jesus told us

- John 16:33 ³³I have said these things to you, that in Me you may have peace. In the world you will have tribulation. But take heart; *I have overcome the world.*” And we are “more than overcomers” (*hupernike*) in Christ! (Rom.8)

That’s faith! *But it only comes from hearing Christ speak in His Word.* You won’t get this from your news feeds – you won’t get it from tweets and FB posts. Please listen to me, you’re my church family, and I love you: but when you fill your minds with the world’s take on life, and you will draw very wrong conclusions. Because this world functions by sight – not by faith – whether it’s CNN or FOX.

And when you live by sight instead of faith, you will end up confusing life with God. And they’re not the same. Isn’t that what Job did – until God appeared and set him straight?

- This is a worn out illustration, but it works: living by sight instead of faith is like looking at the back side of a tapestry – just a bunch of random colors and strings and knots, until you turn it over and see the finished product. Beloved we will only get the real picture of

what God is doing – the other side of the tapestry – when we get to heaven. What we see here and now is not how the story ends.

So God is saying here, at the very end of the OT: “You unbelieving people have departed from My Word, that’s why you have misjudged *Me*, you’ve misjudged *life*, and you’ve misjudged the righteous and the wicked. ***This is not the age of the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.*** But I am sending My Son, My King, and when He comes, He will separate the wheat from the chaff, the sheep from the goats, and you will see ***“the distinction between the righteous and the wicked!”***”

Until then, don’t confuse life with God. Now let’s look at—

I. The accusation of the faithless (vv.13-15).

- ¹³“Your words have been hard against me, says the LORD. But you say, ‘How have we spoken against you?’ ¹⁴You have said, ‘It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the LORD of hosts? ¹⁵And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”

Notice that those who say these hard things against God are contrasted in v.16 with *“those who feared the Lord.”* These people *don’t* fear God – in 3:5: [they] *“do not fear Me.”* They had ceased trembling at God and His Word. And His holiness. That’s why they could smart-off and talk back to God. He had become small and insignificant in their lives.

And beloved, when you gripe and complain and blame God – you’re losing your fear of God, and you are on a slippery slope—

- Psalm 36:1 ¹Transgression speaks to the wicked deep in his heart; (Why?) there is no fear of God before his eyes.

They had the audacity to say, ‘It is vain to serve God.’ . . . Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape!” Have you heard people talk like that? “I tried religion, but it didn’t do anything. I just wasted a lot of perfectly good Sundays. And I know atheists who are better people than Christians, and God doesn’t seem to punish them.”

This is what happens when you lose your fear of God! You judge life by what you see – what appears to be, instead of by what God says. It happened to Job when His world was turned upside-down—

- Job 21:7–15 ⁷Why do the wicked live, reach old age, and grow mighty in power? ⁸Their offspring are established in their presence, and their descendants before their eyes. ⁹Their houses are safe from fear, and no rod of God is upon them. ¹⁰Their bull breeds

without fail; their cow calves and does not miscarry. ¹¹They send out their little boys like a flock, and their children dance. ¹²They sing to the tambourine and the lyre and rejoice to the sound of the pipe. ¹³They spend their days in prosperity, and in peace they go down to Sheol. ¹⁴They say to God, ‘Depart from us! We do not desire the knowledge of your ways. ¹⁵What is the Almighty, that we should serve him? And what profit do we get if we pray to him?’

That was godly Job – at his worst. And the Psalmist felt like this when he confused life with God

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- Psalm 73:2–5 ²But as for me, my feet had almost stumbled, my steps had nearly slipped. ³For I was envious of the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. ⁴For they have no pangs until death; their bodies are fat and sleek. ⁵They are not in trouble as others are; they are not stricken like the rest of mankind. ¹²Behold, these are the wicked; always at ease, they increase in riches. ¹³All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. ¹⁴For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

Would you like some cheese with that ‘whine?’ But we read on, and the Psalmist went back to church. He came to his senses. He had living by sight instead of faith. What he saw *seemed* to be true, but it wasn’t the end of the story, was it? ***This is not the age of “the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.”***

And then in v.16, for the first time in Malachi, we read about a faithful remnant, who still feared and loved God. We were beginning to wonder if there were any of those people left!—

II. The assurance to the faithful (vv.16-17).

- ¹⁶Then ***those who feared the LORD*** spoke with one another.

These God-fearing people took Malachi’s words seriously, and they got together and “*spoke with one another.*” (in groups of 10 or less) We don’t know what they said, but I’m sure they grieved over the sins of the people, and they wept and confessed the sins of their people – because this is exactly what those who feared the Lord (during this same time) did in Ezra 10, and in Nehemiah 9 – you should read those prayers of confession – Ezra 10, Nehemiah 9.

And look at God’s response—

- “The LORD paid attention and heard them.”

He heard them! The doubters charged God with not caring, not listening, right? But when those who feared Him cried out, He heard. Beloved, God always hears the cries of His children when they come to Him, broken, with humble hearts—

- Psalm 34:6 ⁶This poor man cried, and the LORD heard him and saved him out of all his troubles.
- Psalm 116:1–2 ¹I love the LORD, because he has heard my voice and my pleas for mercy. ²Because he inclined his ear to me, therefore I will call on him as long as I live.

Israel as a nation had turned away from God. They disobeyed His Word – and then blamed *Him* for not answering their prayers. But they were the ones to blame. Isaiah wrote this 150 years earlier—

- Isaiah 59:1–2 ¹Behold, the LORD’s hand is not shortened, that it cannot save, or his ear dull, that it cannot hear; (don’t put this on God) ²but your iniquities have made a separation between you and your God, and your sins have hidden his face from you so that he does not hear.

But when this godly remnant cried out to God, *“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.

This wasn’t a literal book – but a figurative book that God keeps on His own people – maybe it’s the same as the book of life. *The point is this: God will not forget His own—*

- ¹⁷“They shall be mine, says the LORD of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, (“The word for “treasured possession” meant the special private property of a king. He’s talking about the final judgment when all men and angels will see who belonged to God, and on that day, *“I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.”*)

Right now, it’s unclear, who belongs to God and who’s just talkin’ the talk. It’s unclear who is saved and who will be judged, but God wants His people to know they will be spared on that day. v.18 is God’s answer to the accusations against Him—

III. The destruction of the faithless (v.18-4:1).

- ¹⁸Then 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.*

“Oh that day is never coming. Judgment Day? Really? God isn’t settling any scores in this world – just watch the news. I believe John Lennon: “Imagine there's no heaven, It's easy if you try, No hell below us, Above us only sky.”

No. It’s coming, and all that is unclear now, will be made clear then. And it will be clear who belongs to God: “then you shall see *the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.*”

Jesus talked much about this coming day, didn’t He? Remember the parable of the wheat and the weeds in Matt.13.? In this age, it’s hard for us to tell which is which – we can be fooled – and what about Kanye? Jesus explained His parable—

- Matthew 13:38–43 ³⁸The field is the world, and the good seed is the sons of the kingdom. The weeds are the sons of the evil one, ³⁹and the enemy who sowed them is the devil. The harvest is the end of the age, and the reapers are angels. ⁴⁰Just as the weeds are gathered and burned with fire, so will it be at the end of the age. ⁴¹The Son of Man will send his angels, and they will gather out of his kingdom all causes of sin and all law-breakers, ⁴²and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. ⁴³*Then* the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father. *Then* – not *now* – but *then*.

He went on in ch.13: in this present age death sweeps through history, like a dragnet, gathering people into its net – good and bad—

- Matthew 13:48–50 ⁴⁸When it was full, men drew it ashore and sat down and sorted the good into containers but threw away the bad. ⁴⁹So it will be at the end of the age. The angels will come out and separate the evil from the righteous ⁵⁰and throw them into the fiery furnace. In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.

And Jesus made it clear that this day will be the day of His return in glory—

- Matthew 25:31–34 ³¹“When the Son of Man comes in his glory, and all the angels with him, then he will sit on his glorious throne. ³²Before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. ³³And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left. ³⁴Then the King will say to those on his right, ‘Come, you who are blessed by my Father, inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world.
- Matthew 25:41 ⁴¹“Then he will say to those on his left, ‘Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.

It will be a terrible day for those who rejected God and His Son. Back to 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.

John the Baptist had these words from Malachi in mind that day at the Jordan River when he told the Pharisees that Messiah had come and—

- Matthew 3:12 ¹²His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”

It will be an awful day for unbelievers, but it will be just the beginning of their punishment. The fire of judgment won’t annihilate them – they won’t cease to exist – they will wish they could. Jesus said that they will go to a place of eternal, conscious torment, with “weeping and gnashing of teeth.”

- Revelation 14:11 ¹¹And the smoke of their torment goes up forever and ever, and they have no rest, day or night.

IV. The destiny of the faithful (vv.2-4).

- ²But 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.

That should be a capital S in Sun, shouldn’t it? And maybe we can just spell it S-O-N, because it’s talking about Jesus, when He comes again. Zechariah prophesied this in—

- Lk.1.78 “The Sunrise from on high shall visit us.”

Don’t over-analyze this, or you’ll ruin it – it’s poetry – but it’s beautiful—Jesus is the light of the world. Isaiah said this about Jesus’ first coming—

- Isaiah 9:2 ²The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shone.

And when Jesus comes again, He will flood the universe with the light of His glory! Beloved, Jesus is the light of the world, and when He returns, all the evil, lying deception, and fake news of this world will vanish: when the light comes on, the roaches will run!

And this is so good, please get this: the light of Christ’s glory will shine on His people, and we will reflect His glory, and finally be vindicated. And all the people who persecuted us and ridiculed us, and called Christians losers, will see that we really were saved by a crucified Carpenter, and we are sons of God. Oh, there is a day!—

- Matthew 13:43 ⁴³*Then* the righteous will shine like the sun in the kingdom of their Father.
- Psalm 37:6 ⁶He will bring forth your righteousness as the light, and your justice as the noonday.

And when He comes, He will bring “healing in His wings:” not every disease is healed this side of heaven, right? But when Jesus returns and raises us, our bodies will be transformed, and in perfect health – “then all hurt and pain will cease, and we’ll be with Him forever, and in His glory, we will live! Oh yeah!”

And we will have this *sudden* sense of freedom – from our bondage to sin, and pain, and suffering: like a calf that’s been penned up in its stall, and finally, it’s set free—

- “You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.”

No more sheltering in place, amen? No more social distancing. Every face will be smiling and UNCOVERED! That’s true: we will have unhindered, unobstructed fellowship with the triune God and with each other – forever. Then he says something that sounds out of place—

- ³And you shall tread down the wicked, for they will be ashes under the soles of your feet, on the day when I act, says the LORD of hosts.

What he is saying is that those who suffered in this life to keep their faith, and kept obeying and serving God even through mocking and ridicule – they’re going to have front row seats to see the justice of God.

*We don’t desire to see anyone die in their sins and suffer for their own sins. We desire they would repent and be saved. But beloved, to display His own glory and justice, God says to His people: “*You shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.*” *And we will give glory to God!*

So the mockers are wrong: God is just. He will show the distinction between the righteous and the wicked. And here is Malachi’s exhortation to anyone who will listen—

- “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the statutes and rules that I commanded him at Horeb for all Israel.”

“I’m calling you to repentance. This is a moment of mercy: Keep my Word. Walk by faith, not by your sight.” This is the same way the Preacher ended that confusing book of Ecclesiastes—

- Ecclesiastes 12:13–14 . . . Fear God and keep His commandments, for this is the whole duty of man. ¹⁴For God will bring every deed into judgment, with every secret thing, whether good or evil.

And then, his final word: The last word from God for 400 years, until He spoke again through a scroungy-looking guy at the Jordan River yelling, “Repent!”

V. Jesus is coming! (vv.5-6).

- ⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes. ⁶And 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.”

This is John the Baptist. Remember our message two weeks ago from—

- Malachi 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.

The messenger is *John the Baptist*, the herald and forerunner of Jesus, who is “the messenger of the covenant.” Didn’t Jesus come into His temple and clean in out when He made His appearance?

So here in Mal.4:5, he says that God will send *Elijah* before the great and awesome day of the Lord – and that day will be the terrible day of judgment on unbelievers (4:1). But this isn’t literally, a resurrected Elijah, it’s John the Baptist. We know this because his father, Zechariah said that John—

- Luke 1:17 . . . will go before him in *the spirit and power of Elijah*, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared.”

John will fulfill Malachi’s prophecy. Jesus *also* said that John is Elijah—

- Matthew 11:10 [speaking of John] ¹⁰This is he of whom it is written, “Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.’

And John the Baptist came to prepare the way for Jesus at his first coming, right? But this is where it gets sticky: look again at—

- Malachi 4:5 ⁵“Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the LORD comes.

And this is the same day as—

- Malachi 4:1 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.

Both of these verses are talking about fire and judgment at Jesus’ *Second Coming*. So I told you I would try to untangle this for you—

The prophets who prophesied about Jesus spoke of His suffering, and death, and resurrection – and they also prophesied about His coming in glory, and judging His enemies, and setting up His glorious kingdom here on earth. What they didn’t understand is that this would happen in two comings: His first coming to suffer and die for the sins of His people – and His second coming in glory and judgment—

If you remember what we learned in ch.3: At His first coming, He came to “purify the sons of Levi” – to atone for the sins of His elect (3:4), but when comes again—

- Malachi 3:5 ⁵“Then I will draw near to you for judgment. . .

The prophets saw these as happening at the same time – they didn’t get two comings. Peter wrote this—

- 1 Peter 1:10–12 . . . the prophets who prophesied about the grace that was to be yours searched and inquired carefully, ¹¹inquiring what person or time the Spirit of Christ in them was indicating when he predicted the sufferings of Christ and the subsequent glories. ¹²It was revealed to them that they were serving not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you through those who preached the good news to you by the Holy Spirit sent from heaven, things into which angels long to look. (even the angels scratch their heads!)

The people who were paying attention when Jesus came asked the same question when He predicted His death and resurrection—

- Mark 9:11–13 ¹¹And they asked him, “Why do the scribes say that first Elijah must come?” (Good question!) ¹²And he said to them, “Elijah does come first to restore all things. And how is it written of the Son of Man that he should suffer many things and be treated with contempt? ¹³But I tell you that *Elijah has come*, and they did to him whatever they pleased, as it is written of him.”

So we shouldn’t be surprised that even John had trouble understanding all of this. Sitting in prison, awaiting execution, John was so discouraged that Jesus hadn’t brought the fire with Him.

He wanted Him to clear the threshing floor and Jesus was telling people to turn the other cheek! He even sent some his disciples to Jesus—

- Matthew 11:3 ³and they said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or shall we look for another?”

Jesus told them: “Go back and tell John what you hear and see! Blind receive sight, dead are raised – I’m the Messiah, and John is Elijah. It’s all good.” And the fire will come, right? When I come back!”

So back to Malachi. Beloved – those folks were waiting on Jesus’ first coming, and He came. We’re waiting on His Second Coming, and He will come. And when He does, *“you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.”* So don’t fret over evildoers. Don’t be surprised when things seem backwards and upside down in this world. Justice is coming. And your vindication will come too.

- Malachi 4:2 ²And for you who fear His name, the Sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. You shall go out leaping like calves from the stall.

During prayer—

- James 5:7–11 ⁷Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. ⁸You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand. ⁹Do not grumble against one another, brothers, so that you may not be judged; behold, the Judge is standing at the door. ¹⁰As an example of suffering and patience, brothers, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹Behold, we consider those blessed who remained steadfast. You have heard of the steadfastness of Job, and you have seen the purpose of the Lord, how the Lord is compassionate and merciful.

Lord we long for that day when You will dry every tear, right every wrong, heal every disease – resolve every conflict. When You bring all things together in Jesus. Help us to eagerly await that day with patience and grace, with purity and holiness – and please help us to tell others it’s coming.