

“What’s In It For Me?’ and Other Such Questions As The Last Day Approaches” (Malachi 3:13-18)

Last Sunday of the Church Year, November 24th, 2013

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Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. It is a fact that people speak “hard against God” as our reading from Malachi 3 says this morning. That is people are supremely smug in their criticism against God, especially as they use these criticisms as rationales for not believing in God. When people do this they justify – or at least *try* to justify – living life as if there is no God. This makes things supremely convenient for the sinful flesh, so that we are also justified in doing whatever we want. Which is to say to disbelieve in the true God is to reinforce our justification for being our own god (a very unwise path to say the least), but this is the reason that the saying is true: everyone – in their own way – is quite religious; everyone follows something, even if that something is themselves.

But when arrogance takes over, people – mere mortals – speak “hard against God.” To speak “hard” is to speak critically. As easy as it is for some to complain about our government (even though we are called to pray for our governmental leaders, 1st Timothy 2:2), some find it just as easy – or easier – to complain against God. The original word in Hebrew for this speaking “hard,” is to be speaking “strong,” or in a way that is insolent, presumptuous, wicked, godless, and rebellious. This is the spirit that is completely resistant to God and puts oneself over God. In fact when God in Malachi 3:13 points out the problem, these insolent men talk back and become argumentative towards God: *“How have we spoken against you?”*

You might think to yourself that right about now we should be relieved that the Scriptures here are about the prophet Malachi speaking to a very specific audience: to the priests and people in Judah, *and – “whew” – not to me! After all, I am certainly not so insolent as that! But be warned dear Christian: do not lose the application of this word to you and me today. Our sinful flesh is still with us and it knows full well the way of insolence and the resultant hardness towards the Lord! Malachi’s words are just as applicable today when it comes to our sinful nature...we do not want God telling us, we want to tell God! And for this we just plain deserve to die, because it means that we fight against the very Author of Life Himself! So Solomon taught: “There is a way that seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death (Proverbs 14:12).”*

How can we be so sure of the contemporary application to us today? Because our flesh tempts us daily to focus on the critical analysis as elaborated upon in the next verse at Malachi 3:14 *which seeks to justify our hardness and criticism against God:*

“You 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?’”

And here we see what the flesh, the sinful nature in all of us does with religion and faith. To put it plainly our sinful nature makes a grandiose presumption about why we are alive, why we are here. That presumption and assumption is that we are here to be pleased on the basis of our own standard, our own desire; we are here to have what we want. Rhonda Byrne wrote a little book in 2006 entitled *The Secret* which was hugely successful. Here Ms. Byrne explains her basic premise:

There is a truth deep down inside of you that has been waiting for you to discover it, and that Truth is this: you deserve all good things life has to offer. You know that inherently, because you feel awful when you are experiencing a lack of good things. All good things are your birthright! You are the creator of you, and the law of attraction is your magnificent tool to create whatever you want in your life. Welcome to the magic of life, and the magnificence of You! (p. 41)

Our flesh likes the worldview that we are the creator of ourselves. That we have a right to take what is pleasing to us. If we believe something is good for us, then that becomes our birthright; that becomes what drives us. Now there are many things in this life that we have freedom to desire or not to desire. If you have interest in certain forms of entertainment (I recommend the *Lakers*) or if you have an interest to pursue a certain hobby, or if you have preferences in the civil realm when it comes to cultural traditions or political systems, that's fine, but we cross a line when we presume that our source of peace, our source of identity, our understanding as why we are alive becomes about what we want. This is a grandiose assumption and it is easily applied to faith in the minds and hearts of many. And the moment we permit ourselves to think this way, to expect this way, we set ourselves up for bitter and discouraging disappointment, because this is not why we are here and this is not what the Lord has called us to live for (unless you understand that the desire of faith is the desire for the Lord Himself and His will).

And yet even Christians are tempted to play this game. To go back to Malachi 3:14 again: *“You 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?’”* And this time we add the consideration of the next verse, verse 15: *“And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evil-doers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.”* And this thought-line of the seeming unfairness of living in faith compared to those who do not believe and yet so often seem so strong, rich, and successful in this life, can be a great source of discouragement for God's people. Psalm 73 is an amazing elaboration of this very observation that can fill our souls with frustration and tempt

us to think that the Lord is permitting an unjust and an unfair situation. We must be very careful against this way of thinking most especially when we take into consideration what will happen in the End when the Lord comes to judge, but first things first.

Malachi 3:14-15 teaches us about two HUGE mistakes people make about what faith is, and what the life of faith is about:

- 1) Many assume that the reason we follow God is so that we can profit in this life.

In the most simple terms: many people assume that the reason they should believe in God and follow Christ is so that good things will happen to them in this life. This may sound hard to believe, but it is absolutely the case that some people identify themselves as believers for this very reason. When Pastor Joel Osteen became one of the most famous Christian pastors in the U.S. through his first book *Your Best Life Now*, I had to sit down to carefully digest his 310 pages. I quickly realized that this was not a book about the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ, but it was a book about attitude adjustment and the benefits that come from a good attitude. Now some of the things may be true in and of themselves, but the problem comes when the Christian faith itself is presented as a self-promotion program. So Pastor Osteen elaborates in ways such as these:

For example, maybe you'll find yourself in a crowded restaurant, with limited time, and you need to get a table as soon as possible. You can say, "Father, I thank You that I have favor with this hostess, and she's going to seat me soon (p. 48)."

And with such a mind-set and prayer, you should expect through "faith" to be seated soon. The real horror comes in through several pages that connect this idea to physical illness, injuries and other ailments. If you apply the right attitude and correctly claim God's favor, you can expect healing. I am not by the way in any way, shape, or form denying that the Lord may choose to heal in miraculous fashion to this very day, but the point is that sometimes our Gracious God says – as He says in fact at 2nd Corinthians 12:9 – ***"My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."*** Therefore we dare not play the profit, name-it-and-claim it game.

The ultimate problem is plain to see now right? If this is our presumption that we are in the faith for self-profit then it is only a matter of time that we will say, "It's all in vain and I'm out!" So much for being a believer! But such a so-called "faith" was mistaken right out of the gates.

The second problem that is revealed in Malachi 3:14-15 is:

2) That the insolent complain about their disappointment for lack of God's proper response – as they saw it – to their “walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts.” The word “mourning” is the word for “black,” it is the word of penitence, expressing repentance, crying out for sin, confessing that we are but ashes, confessing our need for God. But here is the truly unsettling revelation that comes out here: sometimes, people just put on a show; sometimes so-called “believers” go through the motions; they put on black, they say the “right words,” they act all religious and act like they mean it, but the whole time they are focused on the reward that will come through their outward piety and religiosity...that's why they pray, that's why they worship, that's why they confess...they hope by seeming very religious that God will be on their side. The insolent look back and say, “It was all a waste of time, because nothing came from it!”

Oh thank the Lord for this insight! We do not confess our sins, we do not worship, we do not pray, we do not love, we do not forgive, we do not do anything that belongs for Christians to do apart from the reward and the grace and the blessing and the salvation that God has *already* given to us in the Lord Jesus Christ. We are all of these things, not so that we can get more, but because we have already received the best of the best: already our sins have been forgiven; already we have the grace of God in Christ; already we have the kingdom of God and eternal life; already we have the love of God...already...and for this we joyfully and thankfully respond...we don't go through the motions to milk God for more, but we do what we do for what we already have in Christ and if Christ isn't enough for you, then you are no Christian, because you actually are foolish enough to think there is something better.

But there is nothing better and the Gospel in Malachi 3:16-18 is amazing. There is in fact already a distinction among people: some continue to be insolent and that of course is all the flesh can be: critical, complaining, and mad at God. It is the flesh that says, “Forget you God! I can get what I want without you, thank you very much!” And the sad thing is that everything...and I mean EVERYTHING that is gotten this way turns to dust and yet that person will have to face eternity without the Lord that they rejected...and THAT is much more terrifying than the discomfort and struggles we have in this life.

But another group is formed by God's grace. This gathering also consists of sinners, but these sinners by God's grace believe in and have faith in the forgiveness of their sins, so they become alarmed at the tendency of the flesh and instead of gathering together to resist God, they do something else as recorded in Malachi 3:16:

“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.”

These (like you) were given the gift of faith. That faith is described as “those who feared the Lord.” This is a special kind of “fear,” it is a deep reverence and devotion; it is to realize how much you are loved by the Lord and it is a fear that fills you with love for Him and leads you to worship God. So the gathering of this group is not to speak hard things against God, but rather to console each other and to converse with one another in the saving faith. And when such a people are formed, the Lord here reveals this gem of grace: your name is written in “a book of remembrance” ...your name is recorded as belonging to the Lord...your name will be before Him in Christ as one who will always be in His saving presence...and this is His gift to you by grace through faith in Jesus. What is so awesome about this book of remembrance is that it reminds God to no longer see your sin; it reminds God that you are His beloved child; and reminds God to forget your sin.

Malachi 3:17 also teaches that as a result of His covenant of remembrance of you in Christ that you have also become His “treasured possession.” Once you have become – and you have become – joined to Christ, God looks at you 100% differently. He does not see an insolent child, but now He sees you as a loving father sees his beloved son. The word here for treasured possession is *Segullah...you are His jewels...He performs an adoption and publically declares that you belong to His particular people...and as an inheritance is something that stays with the family, you stay in God’s family. You are now God’s prized possession in Christ!*

Our Gospel this morning (as well as our bulletin cover this morning) reminds us of another instance when it *appeared* that it was all in vain, all for nothing, and without any profit at all: the time when Jesus died on the cross! What did His loving ministry get Him? It got Him crucified! Where was the profit? Where was the reward?

In the Heidelberg Disputation of April 1518, Luther wrote, “*That person does not deserve to be called a theologian who looks upon the ‘invisible’ things of God as though they were clearly ‘perceptible in those things which have actually happened.’*” Luther also wrote: “*Although the works of God are always unattractive and appear evil, they are nevertheless really eternal merits.*” You know the saying, “Sometimes things are not what they seem.” You know the even better saying from Saint Paul in 2nd Corinthians 5:7, “for we walk by faith, not by sight.” Learn not to make judgments based on appearances. It was indeed Jesus hanging on the cross and He did indeed appear to be defeated, but this was in fact the furthest thing from the truth, because on the cross your sin and the sin of the world was covered by His saving blood...on the cross the greatest event in the history of the world took place: God was saving you! So dear Christian the next time you are tempted to ask yourself, “What’s in it for me?” Answer this way: “Jesus, His righteousness, and His eternal life and my readiness for Him to

come again in glory for me! That's what!" In the meantime know that you remain God's treasured possession and the Risen Lord confirms this truth through the precious gift of His body and blood in the Holy Sacrament. As you partake as Jesus says, "in remembrance of me," rejoice that in this sacred remembrance you are also in the Lord's book of remembrance against all appearances – no matter the hardship or difficulties in life – He keeps you counted among the righteous; and He keeps you as His treasure.