

# The Faithful Rewarded

Nov. 1, 2020

Malachi 3:16-18

My thanks to Pastor Zach for filling in for me last week. I admit that God's timing for all of this put him in a slightly bad spot. He got to preach the message where the prophet accuses the people of robbing God by withholding their giving from Him. This week, I get to preach a message of reward for those who stand strong against the current tide of complacency. So, he had to preach the bad news and I get to preach the good news. I know, I know, that's not fair. But tough! Just remember, I didn't plan to get Covid! God was the One who orchestrated all of this and put the plan in place.

So this morning, we pick up the text of our study of Malachi at the end of chapter 3. The prophet has been strong, perhaps as strong in his condemnation of the people of God as any text in Scripture, they were "robbing God." I don't know about you, but I never want to be accused of robbing God. But this is where we pick up the text. There is an interesting twist in the text. It breaks into this dialogue between God and His people with a statement about a group of people, a subset of the whole. The text tells us such people were talking with each other. They were conversing among themselves. While we do not have the content of that conversation, it is abundantly clear where the conversation was headed.

Hear these words from Malachi 3 concerning God's perspective on the faithful remnant of His people in days of rampant abuse, both by the people and by those who lead them. READ Malachi 3:16-18.

Main point: God will reward, not punish those who remain faithful to Him.

This is a key concept throughout Scripture. We see it from end to end. This past week our college study has been in Hebrews II, where we read, (II:6) "And without faith it is impossible to please Him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that He exists and that He rewards those who seek Him."

Or, how about my Wednesday study in Revelation, where the whole orientation of the text is that the end times will reveal God to be faithful, rewarding those who have stood strong for Him and punishing those who have rebelled against Him. The message of the book is that God will make sure justice prevails, His own will be rewarded, His enemies will be punished.

So here, in Malachi 3, we have the promise that God notices the faithful, He records their names and deeds, and WILL reward their faithfulness. We WILL be able to tell the difference between the two groups of people.

So today we have the rare good news portion of the prophet's message. If you are struggling whether it is worth it to stand for God when everyone around you is going their own way, when it seems God doesn't notice, this message is for you. God has ALWAYS noticed, He WILL remember and make things right in the end. There IS a reward for those who pursue God, His Kingdom, His righteousness. That is the solemn promise of Scripture, the promise of the God of Scripture. You can take that one to the bank! (2 parts)

I. The faithful need to be assured that God notices them as well. v.16

It's very much like the family where the naughty child receives all of the attention. Yes, most of the attention is bad attention, discipline perhaps. But it leads those who are not naughty, who are by nature obedient and compliant, to question whether the parents notice them as well. Does God notice those who are faithfully following after Him? That is the question posed here in Malachi 3.

v.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.

Again, we are not told the content of their conversation, but it is not hard to imagine. First of all, we notice that they can identify each other. They know who they are. They identify themselves as a subset of the whole. They recognize that they are not like all the others, and yet they have things in common with each other.

I firmly believe that we are living in such days. I am convinced that the alignments that have always existed, that have divided us are shifting. We have more in common with people across traditions than perhaps we have with people within our own tradition. As we see more and more strife within denominations, within movements, as the divides among us tear us apart, I see new alignments, new alliances taking shape.

From my perspective, we are seeing that we have more in common with people of other traditions but similar values, priorities, perspectives. People in various “united” traditions are finding out they are not all that united. But people within those traditions are actually finding fellowship, comradery with like-minded people from other traditions. Traditional lines and boundaries are being challenged. And I think that this is good. We are finding out that there are solid, faithful believers across the spectrum. As we have often noted, this is who we are at Hillcrest. We do not share a common history, a common faith tradition. We come from all over, from traditions that would seem to be at opposite ends of the spectrum. We have some who believe in the full exercise of spiritual gifts, we have some who believe such gifts have ceased (no cheering or clapping!) We have some who believe the best worship music was written in the 1600’s and ought to be utilized formally, we have some who can’t wait for the next new song to come out. We have some who cling to this or that cherished doctrine and some who care little about that precise doctrine. This is who we are...and we embrace it!

But what we have in common is a deep, personal all-encompassing relationship with the God of the universe through His Son, Jesus. This is who we are, and it impacts every area of our lives, every day of our lives, every relationship we have, every decision that we make. Now, I am quite comfortable standing before you to declare that this is faithfulness to the God of Scripture. I stake my reputation and livelihood on this message that faithfulness to Jesus is faithfulness to God.

And this Christo-centric world view ought to impact all of our relationships. We ought to embrace as brothers and sisters all who agree with this relational perspective on the Christian faith. Oh yes, hear me well, truth matters, doctrinal issues are important. But when it comes to embracing each

other and affirming each other, it ought to be on the basis of faith in Jesus, not denominational or traditional distinction. And that is my point.

The faithful here were in conversation with each other as a subset of the whole. Their commonality was their faithfulness. They may have come from different tribes, had different distinctives, held different positions on various issues, but they could identify each other because of their common fear of the LORD, as it states here.

So, the text then tells us that the LORD heard their conversation. He took note of it. He noticed and did something about it. The text tells us He wrote their names in a book of remembrance, meaning there was and is a permanent record of their faithfulness. They need never fear that their faithfulness would be forgotten, overlooked, allowed to disappear without note. God has it ingrained in Him that these were the people of their generation who lived their lives in accordance to His standards. They feared Him more than anything or anyone. They bowed down when all the others were stiff necked. They honored God with their lives, their goods, their finances, their time when all the others were robbing God. These were His people. Elsewhere in Scripture it says they are engraved on the palms of His hands (Is. 49:16) He will NOT forget. He HAS taken notice. You need not fear that God has forgotten you and your faithfulness to Him. It will be rewarded.

I trust you can see the intended message here. Those who do the right thing when everyone else is doing the wrong thing often feel overlooked, neglected, that their efforts were wasted because no one noticed. They feel isolated, alone, as if they are the only ones doing the right thing. But the truth is that God does notice and He does reward those who earnestly seek Him. It is a permanent record that cannot be erased. The truth is that God knows who are His and will honor them.

II. Judgment will show those who truly serve God and those who do not. vv.17-18

We would like that determination, distinction, differentiation to be known immediately, visibly, tangibly. But a great truth of Scripture is that we must wait for such a time. God allows all to go on living in the same place at the same time. He waits until harvest to separate the wheat from the weeds, the sheep from the goats, the grain from the chaff. It will take place...at judgment. And in the meantime we are called to live by faith. We live by what we know to be true rather than what seems to be true. It may seem that the wicked prosper, that the godly receive little but hardship and persecution for their faithfulness, but just wait until the day of the Lord, the coming of the King, the judgment of the end times. It is then that God will pull out His records and punish those who opposed Him and reward those who served Him. You can count on it!

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.

Notice the terms of possession. They are mine, they are protected, valued, cherished. They will be spared the judgment to come. Again, the context is the prophet proclaiming the coming judgment against those who fail God, who neglect Him or are complacent about Him. They might think of themselves as God’s people, but He knows they are simply going through the motions. There is no sacrifice in their sacrifices, no offering in their offerings, no heart behind their actions, no walk behind their talk. They might appear to all to be holy, examples of holiness but God knows they are not His. As we see at the end of the Sermon on the Mount, such people may protest their inclusion in judgment, claiming all the things they said and did in God’s name. But God will respond with, “Depart from me, you evildoers. I never knew you.” Their names were not written in the book, not on the palms of His hands, not recorded for all of history. They may congregate with the people of God, but He knows who are His and they are NOT HIS.

Yet, on the other hand, there will be those who are rewarded, who will be spared judgment, who will be considered sons of the Father. There will be a clear distinction between those who have passed and those who have failed. That is the truth about judgment.

Once more, I remind you that the basis for this is their fear of the LORD, their esteeming His name, their embracing of Jesus as their Messiah, their only hope. It is not the years of attending church, the list of right things they have done and the lack of a list of the wrongs committed. If that was the case, we would all fail. Instead, there is hope for a thief on a cross, a murderer like Paul, an adulterer like David. There is hope for the worst of us. But it is true that biblical faith is visible, tangible, measurable. When you have at your core a relationship that impacts every area of life, there IS evidence for whether you believe that or not.

18 Then 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.

It will be obvious, visible. There will be made clear a right way and a wrong way to live. There will be people on one side and people on the other side. There will be a dividing line between the two. God will make a distinction between the two.

And yet, as is clear here, the dividing line will not be as we might imagine it to be. It will not be us over here and them over there. It will be some of us, and some of them. There will be a great crowd and a righteous remnant. There will even be people who are surprised. There will be people who are surprised to be included, "Lord, when did we see you in prison and visit you, naked and clothe you, hungry and give you something to eat?" They will be surprised to be included. They will not consider themselves worthy. But there will also be many surprised on the other side. "Oh Lord, I am so glad I am not like those people over there!" Ah, they might just be surprised to learn that "those people over there" are counted by God to be the righteous, and these people here who considered themselves to be pious examples of everything right might just be cast out. That is the nature of the judgment.

Just consider pastors, priests, clergy, professors. We have seen how they are in the crosshairs in this book of Malachi. Is there anyone here who would read this book and declare that ALL clergy, all teachers of the faith will be honored by God as faithful? That would be foolishness. No, they will be held to a higher standard, since they lead others either toward or away from God. So,

there will be some surprised clergy and professors and VIP's on the day of judgment.

And the opposite is true as well. There will be people who can't believe God could ever approve of people like them. They have messed up again and again and again. They have lived years of life on the run from God. But they DO love Jesus and view Him as their only hope. This passage offers a message of hope for such people. Their names are written in a book of remembrance, engraved on the palm of God's hand. He will reward them. They are considered righteous, holy, sanctified, set apart. Isn't that good news? God saves people like that!

If we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) Everything! We will view our lives from the context of coming judgment.
- 2) We will see our lives as either/or not gradations.
- 3) We will not assume that we are in based on our presence among God's people.
- 4) We will put our trust in the promises of God to save those who are His.
- 5) We will live as people of faith as we await the coming judgment, finding fellowship with others of the faithful.