

Malachi 2:17
A Stupid Prayer: The Unjust Praying for Justice
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Introduction

Do you know anyone who is wrong about himself or herself: he thinks he is an extrovert when he is actually an introvert, he thinks he is funny when actually his jokes make no sense whatsoever (and he ends up laughing his head off regardless of how everyone else responds); he thinks he can sing well when actually he can't; he thinks he is creative when actually he is not; he thinks he is level-headed when actually he is a hot head? Have you ever heard a lazy person complain about another person's laziness? You want to respond, "Where is the disconnect? You are just as lazy." Has anyone ever gossiped to you about another believer who "just gossips so much"? Only one who considers himself to be above gossiping will gossip about another person's struggles with gossiping. A messed up self-perception is actually a common phenomenon among people.

I personally know a guy who considers himself religious—he claims to follow a higher power and constantly quotes (the same quotes) from the Bible. Whenever I talk to him he always says things like, "You know how it is, man... you know what I am talking about. Its all about loving as Jesus loved." This man knows that I am a pastor and thus he speaks to me like an "insider" or something. He will make a statement about humility or love and then will laugh afterwards in way that communicates, "Oh... you know the woes of being the righteous among the wicked!" And yet, everyone around this man can see that he is as far from religious as you can possibly get. When he gets interrupted in the middle of our conversation about "God" (whoever "God" might be to him) by his kids, he has no problem yelling, swearing, and cussing at them mid-sentence, and then, without skipping a beat, he will pick up where he left off in our discussion about the woes of being the righteous. Everyone around him can see the hypocrisy—the façade of religion. To be honest I feel bad for this man. The truth about him is so evident to everyone around, and yet, you can tell that he really thinks that he is on this earth as God's representative. Yet no one seeks advice from him, no one asks him to pray, no one brings up spiritual conversation around him because they can discern him much better than he can discern himself. You almost feel bad for the guy.

It is kind of like when someone who thinks they are funny tells a really stupid joke that makes no sense. Everyone stands around and gives a sympathy laugh just to spare the guy. Everyone knows that it will ruin his day (if not his world) if he were to come to terms with the fact that he really isn't funny at all. He is so oblivious to who he is in reality.

This is the exact problem with the Israelites in Malachi 2:17-3:5: the Israelites are wrong about themselves. They think themselves to be one way when in fact they are another; they think they are up when they are actually down, right when they are actually left, round when they are actually square, black when they are actually white. What we find in this section of the book of Malachi is that the Israelites think themselves to be God's true, innocent people when they are actually not. Their self-perception is completely out of whack.

I really believe that these Israelites genuinely believe that they are sincere and righteous before God. Without a doubt, the Israelites in Malachi's day are wicked and vile; they couldn't give a rip about God, his holiness, nor his glory. For example, we saw from Malachi 1:2-5 that the Israelites questioned God's love; in 1:6-2:4 they were presenting their junk, their trash, on God's altar against his word; in 2:5-9 we saw that they had a non-existent relationship with God through his word; in 2:10-16 we saw that they had broken the very heart of the covenant that God had made with them by breaking faith with God and each other by divorcing their wives in order to marry foreign women. The Israelites that Malachi was preaching to were not just messing up every now and then—trying to get things right but not quite living up to their potential. No, these Israelites were sold out to sin. However, in light of their outrageous rebellion, they really did believe themselves to be a righteous people afflicted by injustice.

What we have seen from the beginning of Malachi is that these Israelites were an unjust people, a rebellious people, and here we find them claiming themselves to be innocent victims of injustice. They were confident in their service on God's behalf; They sincerely thought that they were righteous; they sincerely believed that they were clean; they sincerely believed that God owed them, because they sincerely thought that they had been faithful and obedient to him.

Malachi 2:17

Look at the conversation that they had with God in 2:17.

17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you ask, "How have we wearied [Him]?" When you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the LORD's sight, and He is pleased with them," or "Where is the God of justice?"

What we see in this verse is another argument between God and the Israelites. We saw something similar in 1:2; 1:6-7; 2:13-14. This conversation starts out with an alarming word from God. God states that he is "wearied" with the words of his people. In other words, the prayers of complaint that his people were bringing were wearing him out. God was saying, "I am sick and tired of your whining! I am sick and tired of your prayers of complaint and accusation!"

The Israelites then contort back, "How have we wearied him?"

Then the Lord spells it out for them, "Do you want to know how your words have wearied me? Common! Just take a look and consider the nature of your whining, accusatory prayers." Take a look at what the Israelites were doing? They were blaming God for not taking action against their enemies. The Israelites felt oppressed, and in many ways they were. They were under the control of the Persians, and had experienced a good deal of conflict from their neighbors. In fact, most scholars suggest that Malachi was written during the same time period of Nehemiah. We know from Nehemiah that the Israelites were receiving much opposition from their neighbors. Have you ever heard of Sanballat and Tobiah? They caused the Israelites much grief. Israel was a weak country with no army, and they were surrounded by bully nations. And what we see in Malachi 2:17 is that the Israelites were angry at God for not coming to their rescue.

And why didn't God come to their rescue? Because, they were a hard-hearted, sinful people who had completely rejected the covenant that God had made with them.

They accused the Lord of not dealing with sin; “*Everyone who does evil is good in the Lord’s sight, and He is pleased with them.*” In saying this the Israelites are accusing God of being loosey goosey on sin. In essence, what they were saying was this; “God you continue to let those who sin against us get away with murder. Why have you not come to our aid; why have you let the evil trample us down; how can you call yourself a holy God and let such injustice happen to your people? You can’t be a holy God—a holy God would not be so indifferent to sin by letting these nations get away with such atrocities against your own people.” Notice in the last half of the verse they say, “Where is the God of justice?” Thus, the Israelites were accusing God of injustice, questioning his righteous character.

Does this complaint of the Israelites sound familiar to you at all? It does to me! It reminds me of Habakkuk’s passionate plea for God to justly deal with the sin of the Israelites. He was overwhelmed by the sinfulness and injustice of Israel and went before God and cried out;

How long, LORD, must I call for help and You do not listen, or cry out to You about violence and You do not save? 3 Why do You force me to look at injustice? Why do You tolerate wrongdoing? Oppression and violence are right in front of me. Strife is ongoing, and conflict escalates. 4 This is why the law is ineffective and justice never emerges. For the wicked restrict the righteous; therefore, justice comes out perverted. (Habakkuk 1:2-4)

How do Habakkuk’s words here differ from the Israelite’s words in Malachi 2:17? The two are different in every way. Habakkuk pled with God trusting in his character. His greatest desire was to see God’s righteousness established, and the innocent and helpless protected. Habakkuk had a broken heart and was pleading with God for mercy on behalf of the helpless. The Israelite’s in Malachi, on the other hand, aren’t pleading with God at all. Habakkuk’s heart was broken over the injustice in Israel, and he cried out for God to establish peace and justice. The Israelites in Malachi’s day couldn’t give a rip about God’s justice! They were just ticked off that God wasn’t giving them what they wanted. The Israelites were blaming God, questioning his righteous character—suggesting that he was responsible for the injustice going on around them.

Habakkuk was broken, while the Israelites in Malachi were angry. Habakkuk was concerned for the helpless (justice), while the Israelites in Malachi were only concerned for themselves. Habakkuk pled with God on the basis of his character, the Israelites in Malachi demanded God because they were suspicious of his character. Habakkuk blamed the sin on his own fellow Israelites; the Israelites blamed the sin on God and his lack of action.

The Israelites had no hope, no trust, and no faith in the character of God. All they wanted was what they deemed to be rightfully theirs. They felt that God owed them much because of their offerings and prayers. And when he failed to deliver they got angry.

Really, the Israelites felt that they were righteous victims. They felt that it was wrong for God to sit idly by as they were being treated unjustly by the surrounding nations. The interesting thing, though, is that if you read on in the context of Malachi you

will see that these same Israelites who claimed to be victims of injustice were unjust themselves.

Look with me at Malachi 3:1-5;

1 "See, I am going to send My messenger, and he will clear the way before Me. Then the Lord you seek will suddenly come to His temple, the Messenger of the covenant you desire—see, He is coming," says the LORD of Hosts. 2 But who can endure the day of His coming? And who will be able to stand when He appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire and like cleansing lye. 3 He will be like a refiner and purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver. Then they will present offerings to the LORD in righteousness. 4 And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will please the LORD as in days of old and years gone by.

5 "I will come to you in judgment, and I will be ready to witness against sorcerers and adulterers; against those who swear falsely; against those who oppress the widow and the fatherless, and cheat the wage earner; and against those who deny [justice to] the foreigner. They do not fear Me," says the LORD of Hosts.

Have you ever heard the statement, “Be careful of what you ask for; you just might get it.” This is exactly what God is saying to the Israelites through Malachi. Notice the words “seek” and “desire” in vs. 1. In essence, what Malachi says is this, “You want justice Israel? You want God to come and deal justly with those who have done evil? Do you really want this?” The last thing on the planet that the Israelites should have been seeking or praying for or desiring was justice; rather, they should have been “seeking,” “desiring,” and praying for mercy.

What we find in vs. 2-4 is that the God of Justice that they *think* they want so badly will come, but he will not come to deliver his people from their enemies; rather, he is going to come and thoroughly judge, cleanse, prune, sift, and purify his own people.

In verse 5 we see the climax of this fourth section. We see God declaring that God will come to deal with injustice; however, he is not going to deal with the injustice of the nations who are oppressing Israel; rather, he is going to deal with the injustice of the Israelites. In vs. 5 he shows the Israelites exactly how unjust they have been, and thus he shows them how much they are deserving of God’s judgment.

For the Israelites to cry out for justice is absolutely insane. It is like a murder crying out to God that he might be just to those who are seeking his life; it is like a thief praying that God might judge the one who broke into his house and stole; it is like an abortion doctor praying that God might judge the 9/11 terrorists for slaying the innocent. *Here in Malachi 2:17 we have the unjust praying for justice.* Talk about a blunder! Talk about a stupid prayer. In praying this they were implicitly praying for their own destruction. What should have they been praying for? Mercy for their own injustices.

A Messed Up Self-Perception

The thing that just really amazes me about these Israelites is how oblivious they are to their own sin. Look at the list of injustices in vs. 5. The list goes on and on and here they are in 2:17 praying for God’s justice; accusing God himself of injustice for not

fighting on their behalf. How could the Israelites have become so dull? How could a people so wrapped up in their own sin believe themselves to be so right with God? These people are oblivious to their true condition before God. They truly do have a messed up self-perception.

I believe that these Israelites really believed themselves to be righteous and just and good; they really saw themselves as innocent victims; they really thought that they had been faithful to the word of God. After all, they brought their sacrifices, prayed their prayers, and did whatever else the law demanded. I am sure that if you were to challenge them on their sincerity and obedience, they would have used *every four-letter word in the dictionary* to defend their innocence (how ironic).

The question I have is this, “How can people as wicked as these Israelites be so wrong about themselves?” **How can they miss the big fat X on their forehead?** The answer is quite easy. This is a universal condition. The reason people can be so clueless about who they truly are is because we as humans are corrupt at the very core of our being. We love sin, which is by nature deceitful (Hebrews 3:13). Our perception of all reality, including the reality of who we are, has been distorted. Can we not see this when we speak to the average unbeliever. Most unbelievers believe themselves to be good enough to be saved. Most think that they are fit for heaven because their good outweighs their bad. There is a big fat X on every unbeliever’s forehead, and anyone who is simply honest about their own private thought life knows the depth of their sin, and yet most pretend as if they are fit and worthy for heaven because their good outweighs their bad! Would we not all agree that a person who would not admit that every thought and intention of their heart was only evil continually (Genesis 6:5) was either insane, a liar, or dead? We all know that our thoughts are enough to condemn us, and still unbelievers feel that they do not need to trust Christ for their salvation.

Think, for instance, about Paul before his conversion. He killed Christians in the name of God (Acts 9:1-2). He had a passion (zeal) for God (Philippians 3:6). His passion was not pleasing to God; nonetheless, he believed it was (and with all of his being!). This is why we must be careful to remember that the heart is deceitful above all things. Look with me at Jeremiah 17:9-10:

“9 The heart is more deceitful than anything else and desperately sick—who can understand it? 10 I, the LORD, examine the mind, I test the heart to give to each according to his way, according to what his actions deserve.”

The heart is deceitful because it is thoroughly contaminated with sin. This is why we must be suspicious of ourselves. I would agree with Dave Harvey when he says that we ought to be suspicious of ourselves in regard to our heart’s motivations.¹ Even the good things we do can be so contaminated by motives and thoughts that are not pleasing to God. As Christians we must remember that God has removed our heart of stone, replaced it with a heart of flesh, and sent his Spirit to dwell within. Thus, although this passage certainly says something about the Christian, the Christian has become a new creature.

Even still, though, look at what the Apostle Paul has to say about his own motives in 1 Corinthians 4:3-5:

¹ Dave Harvey, *When Sinners Say ‘I Do’: Discovering the Power of the Gospel for Marriage* (Wapwallopen: Shepherd Press, 2007), 64.

3 I care very little if I am judged by you or by any human court; indeed, I do not even judge myself. 4 My conscience is clear, but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me. 5 Therefore judge nothing before the appointed time; wait till the Lord comes. He will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts. At that time each will receive his praise from God. (NIV)

What is going on here in the context of Paul's letter to the Corinthian church is that he is dealing with those in the Corinthian church who are elevating him, putting him on a pedestal, which was actually causing a divide in the church. Some in the church at Corinth were, in essence, flying the Paul flag higher than the Jesus flag. When he said that he cared very little if he was judged by them, he was not referring to some sort of a negative judgment. Rather, what he was saying was, "I could care less if you judge me to be God's most faithful and trust worthy servant." In other words, Paul was saying, "I don't ultimately get some sort of a 'spiritual high' off of knowing that you consider me to be a Super-Predicator." And why didn't Paul get all the butterflies that most pastors and theologians seek? Because, Paul understood that the people of God are ultimately not the judge of how faithful and godly he is, God is.

In vs. 4 Paul even states that he ministers with a clear conscience. In other words, he considers his work for the Lord to be done with unmixed, pure motives; however, he then states, "*but that does not make me innocent. It is the Lord who judges me.*" Paul knows that there will come a day when the Lord "will bring to light what is hidden in darkness and will expose the motives of men's hearts." Paul knows that although he is unaware of any impure or evil motives in his ministry, only when Jesus comes back and exposes "what is hidden" will he know *for sure* how pleasing his ministry and life was to Jesus.

Thus, he does not get a kick out of the Corinthian's unduly praise of him, because he knows that his sincerity and faithfulness can only be fully determined by the Lord. Not even Paul himself knows what lies deep beneath the skin of his heart. He walks around with a clean conscience, but confesses that he only knows the tip of the iceberg—the tip of what lies in his heart.

How many times has God turned the lights on in your mind and heart, exposing some hidden motive that you didn't even know was there? This is something that I can personally attest to. God will open the eyes of my heart to some sin just beneath the surface of my heart that has been in my heart, motivating my good deeds in the name of God. I hope he does this for you to. If you prayerfully read through Scripture, truly applying it to your heart, God will expose idols and sins that you didn't even realize were there. And you will come to realize how ignorant you are about yourself. This is why I agree with Harvey that we ought to be suspicious of ourselves, even as Paul was.

The point of discussing 1 Corinthians 4 is not to suggest that Paul was questioning his salvation. The purpose, rather, is just to prove that Paul himself knew that there was a limit to how well he could know his own heart.

Turn with me to Matthew 7:21-23. In this passage Jesus warns his hearers of the danger of having a deranged self-perception.

21 "Not everyone who says to Me, 'Lord, Lord!' will enter the kingdom of heaven, but [only] the one who does the will of My Father in heaven. 22 On that day many will say to Me, 'Lord, Lord, didn't we prophesy in Your name, drive out demons in Your name, and do many miracles in Your name?' 23 Then I will announce to them, 'I never knew you! Depart from Me, you lawbreakers!'

Jesus here describes those who have a messed up self-perception. Notice that they enter the after life with an unshakable understanding that God will accept them because of the mighty works he has done through them. They thought that just because God used them they could have assurance that they were his. Jesus teaches that this is not a sufficient basis for knowing whether you will have entrance into heaven or not. Who does Jesus identify as the one who will enter the kingdom of heaven, “but [only] the one who does the will of My Father in heaven.” These people have a messed up perception of themselves. They think themselves to be one way when actually they are another, just like the Israelites in Malachi’s day.

Most people think that they are saved just because they effortlessly fulfill a few Christian rules. They read their Bibles, pray, evangelize, come to church, and teach a class. The Israelites in Malachi’s day had a similar mindset. They thought that they were right before God because they brought their sacrifices to the altar, celebrated the appropriate feasts, frequented the temple, and said all their prayers. And yet, we find that in spite of all of this external adherence, they failed to obey God’s most weighty commandments, love and mercy. God rejected their prayers and rejected them as his people. They could not have had a more skewed self-perception.

The heart is deceitful. You think your motives are pure when you look at the surface of your heart, but as soon as you start to dig a little bit deeper you begin to see how warped you are at the core of your being. You need the word of God to bring to light what lies deep within. The only way you can come to know the true condition of your heart is to prayerfully read God’s word, letting his light shine in the darkest recesses of your heart, exposing what you “O” so badly want to keep hidden.”

Conclusion

Do you have a messed up self-perception? Are you like the Israelites? My plea to you this day is to obey Paul’s admonition in 2 Corinthians 13:5

Test yourselves [to see] if you are in the faith. Examine yourselves. Or do you not recognize for yourselves that Jesus Christ is in you?—unless you fail the test.

This is the most important thing that you can do. The heart is deceitful above all things. Do not rest until God has confirmed in your spirit through his word that you have life from above, that your sins have been forgiven, and your place in heaven secured.

Your heart is deceitful above all things, but if you repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ, you can come to know Christ as the one who cleanses you of your sin. Christ promises to wash and clean all those who come to him no matter how dirty and defiled they may be.

Do not assume that you know yourself. Let God tell you who you are. Do not assume that you are his just because you have done all the right things. Do not hesitate to

see Myself, Kevin, or Moe if you need any counseling. We will pray with you, read the word with you—whatever it takes to minister to your soul. Whatever you do, do not rest until God has confirmed you as his own blood-bought possession. It is better to live 70 years of unrest, testing yourself to make sure that your faith in Christ is genuine, than to spend an eternity in hell.

Jesus can save you.