

Malachi 3:13-15**Worthless Service**

Jimmy Snowden

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Well, this morning we be taking a look at the first two verses of the final dispute in the book of Malachi. As I have said about 20,000 times now, Malachi is conveniently broken up into six different sections. Each section is called a dispute because each of these six sections includes a dispute between God and the Israelites. Each dispute consists (primarily) of three things: 1. God will level an accusation against the Israelites for some sin that they are committing,¹ 2. the Israelites will argue back as if God's accusations were unfounded, and 3. the dispute will close with God proving to the Israelites the validity of His accusation against them. God's ultimate purpose in pointing out to the Israelites the depth of their rebellion and sin was their restoration. In essence, therefore, the book of Malachi is the record of God's pursuit of Israel at the height of her rebellion. The message of Malachi is a strong and stern word of warning to a rebellious people. Do not misunderstand what the message of Malachi is about: it is not the announcement of coming judgment; rather, it is a warning of judgment if they do not repent.

Just because this is the sixth and final dispute in the book of Malachi does not mean that this will be our final sermon in Malachi. What we find from 3:16 to the end of the book is a final word of comfort to the few who have been faithful, and a final word of warning to those who are unmoved in their rebellion against God.

Let's take a look at the particulars of this final dispute between God and Israel.

Malachi 3:15-17

God levels an accusation against the Israelites in vs. 15

"Your words against Me are harsh," says the LORD.

Although the HCSB is a sufficient translation, does it not make sound God like some sort of an offended 8 year old on a play ground? "Teacher, they said mean things against me. They told me that I have weird fingers!" In order to get a better grasp on what the Israelites are saying here, it will be helpful to consider what the word "harsh" literally means. This phrase can be literally rendered; "Your words against me have been strong." The word "strong" or "harsh" refers to a belligerent or combative tone or attitude, and has to do with arrogance before God. As strange as it may sound, the Israelites were gossiping about God in the same way that we may gossip about each other. Really, they were saying strong things not *to* Him but *against* Him. In other words, they were maliciously attacking His character. Imagine if someone were to start a rumor that you cheated on your spouse. Would that not be a "heavy" or "strong" accusation against you? Well, that is the idea here—the Israelites were maliciously slandering God.

And as has been the regular course throughout the book of Malachi, the Israelites reject God's accusation against them (as can be seen in the next part of vs. 15).

¹ The only dispute that does not include this element is the first dispute.

Yet you ask: "What have we spoken against You?"

The Israelites are unwilling to allow the accusatory word of God to convict them of their sin. They simply will not let God do His work on them. They challenge Him once again—which serves as further proof of the validity of His accusation. They are evidencing further and further the hardness of their hearts, and the great insensitivity they have toward God, His word, and the conviction of His Spirit.

God then lays forth for them what they have said against Him.

14 "You have said: 'It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping His requirements and walking mournfully before the LORD of Hosts? 15 So now we consider the arrogant to be fortunate. Not only do those who commit wickedness prosper, they even test God and escape.'"

Are these not strong, harsh, and arrogant words spoken with a belligerent attitude! These are not small accusations against God by the Israelites. The Israelites are accusing God of two things: (1) His failure to repay them for their obedience (vs. 14), and (2) His favor of the wicked (vs. 15). These are heavy words! They are accusing God of both being a derelict father and of prospering the way of the wicked.

The Israelites were wrong on so many levels that it is difficult to even know where to begin. It is evident from the words of their own mouths that they had no concern for the glory of God. The only reason they worshipped and served God was to get something in return—and that something was not Him. He was not their treasure. In fact, they pursued Him as a means to an end—they did not pursue Him as the length, the width, the circumference, the end of their pursuit. He was only good so long as He led them to other treasures. And they only served Him in so far as they could do so without being inconvenienced. As soon as they thought that they had put enough time in, they looked to God to pay immediate rewards. And soon as they realized that He was not about to pay such rewards, they immediately began to complain that God was neglecting them. I will not be focusing on this aspect of Israel's sinfulness, because I have already dealt with it at length in a number of the sermons that I have already preached on the book of Malachi, and especially in my sermon on Malachi 2:13-14, "Broken for All the Wrong Reasons."²

Malachi 3:14

What is root of Israel's sin here? What do their "strong" words against God reveal about their own sinfulness? Let me suggest two things (well... it is actually one thing made of two parts): *the root of Israel's sin is (1) a lack of genuine faith in God, which was (2) the result of having a near-sighted, human-bound perspective.* The root of the sin of the Israelites was a lack of faith in the promises of God. Look at their words against Him: "*It is useless to serve God. What have we gained by keeping His requirements and walking mournfully before the LORD of Hosts?*"

They suggested that their service to God was "in vain," "futile," "profitless." In other words, it was a big fat waste of time. To them serving God was about as profitable

² You can access the sermon manuscript to this sermon at <http://www.biblecreed.com/media/Malachi%20v13-14.pdf> and the video at <http://www.biblecreed.com/media/V05032009malachi.htm>

as chasing after the wind (the famous phrase used in the book of Ecclesiastes). How are you going to catch the wind, and after you catch it, how are you going to keep the wind windy? It was about as profitable as nailing jello to a wall or teaching a white man how to dance or jump.

Before we move on I want to ease some of your fears, because I am certain that there are many of you who are listening this morning and you are thinking, “Jimmy, I know where the Israelites are at. I have been there.” You have prayed for the salvation of a family member maybe for over 20 years, and because of God’s apparent lack of action, his apparent absence has from time to time brought you to a place where you have questioned, “Is it worth it? Am I just wasting my time?” Or maybe you have labored in the church, and have been burned, wounded, and hurt by the people of God time and again, which brought you to a place where you have questioned, “Is it worth it? God, is it really worth it?”

Well, I have good news for you. You are not in the same boat as the Israelites. The Israelites are not struggling with their faith in the promises of God. No, they have already determined that serving God is futile. These are not a bunch of people who are genuinely seeking to please God. No, their service for God is driven by selfish ambition.

What would cause a person to say such a thing; what would cause a person to suggest that serving God was a waste of time? Have you ever considered the words of Christ and questioned, “Is it really worth it?” You have to understand here that the Israelites in Malachi are not merely questioning the worth of serving God, they asserting their absolute certainty that God is not worth the time, the energy, or the effort.

Interestingly, Richard A Taylor actually states that the Israelites’ service for God was “futile,” but not because God had failed to bless them for their obedience; rather, he asserts that their service for God was futile because it was not done out of faith.

“These people were right; their ‘service to God *was* futile (see. Isa 1:13). So-called good works that do not arise from genuine faith and gratitude to God are simply ‘hot checks’ drawn from an empty bank account. They may provide a temporary sense of self-satisfaction, but God recognizes their true value—zero, and he will eventually bring to justice anyone who tries to live on them.”³

So what about it; what would cause a person to suggest that serving God was a waste of time? A lack of faith! A lack of confidence in the faithfulness to His promises. After all, what is the essence of faith? Turn with me to Hebrews 11:6 to find the answer to that question.

Now without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who draws near to Him must believe that He exists and rewards those who seek Him.

So how do the Israelites stack up? What pleases God? Faith! And the author of the Letter to the Hebrews explains the nature of genuine faith. True faith is evidenced by two things: (1) belief in the existence of God, and (2) a belief that God rewards those who

³ Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai and Malachi: An Exegetical and Theological Exposition of Holy Scripture*. The New American Commentary (Nashville: B&H Publishing Group, 2006), 437.

seek Him. True faith is first of all evidenced through belief in the existence of God. Why? Because God is invisible, you cannot see Him. And second of all, it consists in believing that God rewards those who seek Him. And this is where the Israelites have gone wrong. Their acts of service and “obedience” were futile because they were not born out of a confidence that God was going to be faithful to His promises.

This is what makes a lack of faith so horrendous: a lack of faith is ultimately an attack on the character of God. “Yes, I know that God promises rich blessings to those who are faithful to Him. Yes, I know that God promises to protect and provide for those who seek him. I know this to be true... but I just can’t believe it.” Do you see what a lack of faith is, it the ultimate affront against God. It is saying to Him, “I know what you have said, but I don’t believe you. You are a liar!” A lack of faith is born out of a suspicion that God may not be as faithful as He claims to be. He makes promises too big that He cannot keep.

You need to be careful here though that you do not get off on the wrong foot. You must understand that faith is not what many mean it to be today. Because of the extreme parts of the charismatic movement, many think that faith is simply ‘belief that God wants to do supernatural things.’ No... this is not faith. Surely, we must have faith that God can do supernatural things and we must believe that He wants to do *certain* supernatural things, but the faith spoken of in the Scriptures is something much different than this open-ended, shot in the dark sort of faith. Let me put it to you this way: the Scriptures do not call us to, what many would call today, ‘blind faith.’ No, God does not call you to believe anything that He has not already promised that He will give or do for you as He has revealed in Scripture. Some people do not like this because they are not content with what God has promised in His word. God’s promises just do not quite stack up to what they would consider to be ‘the blessed life.’ What is the faith of Scripture? It is confidence that God will act as He has said that He will act in the word of God; that God will do what He has said that He will do in the word of God; confidence that God will pull through for you where He says that He will pull through for you in the word of God.

Let me ask you a question; was it a step of ‘blind faith’ for Abraham to leave his homeland in search of the land of Canaan? Abraham left everything that he knew—he left the comfort and security of his homeland and set out as nomad. It really was crazy for Abraham to leave Ur of the Chaldeans. Was it a step of ‘blind faith’ for Abraham to believe that God was going to provide for him a son even at the ripe old age of 100? Abraham was a crusty old man, way past the years of child-bearing, as was his wife. And yet Abraham believed God. Was this a step of ‘blind faith?’ Absolutely not. Why? Because the God who created the universe, the God who created Adam promised him a son in his old age. Really, then, Abraham was stepping into the light—the light of God’s powerful and trustworthy word. When you think about it, a lack of faith is “blind,” because a lack of faith is based upon no objective promises.

Consider what George H. Guthrie has to say about the nature of faith as described in Scripture,

“True faith is action *taken in response to the unseen God and his promises*. Faith, rather than merely static belief or cognitive assent, spurs one to act in accordance with God’s truth. Its boldness, however, seems especially to do with the fact that these great people of faith are backed up by the Unseen. They step forward with

eyebrow-raising tenacity and confidence and with no perceptible reason for doing so. But God has spoken. God has manifested himself, and this is reason enough. Therefore, we are called to an active, confident faith that finds its reason in the unseen God. If we have faith of another stripe, we need to reevaluate our ‘faith.’”⁴

You have to understand the situation that the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews was confronting. The writer of the letter to the Hebrews was writing to a group of Hebrew Christians who were beginning to undergo serious persecution. At the time of writing, it is clear that the Hebrew Christians were not being martyred (this can be seen from Hebrews 12:4), but they were beginning to undergo a great deal of persecution. And why did the author of the Letter to the Hebrews write this letter? Because they were on the verge of rejecting Christ for the sake of avoiding persecution. They were questioning, “Is it worth it? Is Jesus worth it—is remaining faithful to Christ worth the confiscation of my property from the government? Is remaining faithful to Christ worth the confiscation of my family from the government? Is remaining faithful to Christ worth giving up my life?” And the author’s whole objective in writing this letter is to let them know, “Yes, my friends, it is worth it!”

Hebrews 11:6 states that true faith believes that God rewards those who seek Him. Well, what sort of rewards does God grant those who seek Him? The answer to this question is found all throughout Hebrews 11.

The whole point of Hebrews 11 is that those who had faith did not receive what they were promised before they died. The point of Hebrews 11 is that true faith has the ability to enjoy treasures that cannot be given until after death has happened. If you don’t get that, you don’t understand Hebrews 11. Faith in Hebrews 11 is putting your faith in the post-death blessings of the cross. To use Hebrews 11 as a proof text for having some sort of a ‘blind faith’ that God wants to shower you with earthly blessings is to miss the point of this passage altogether. The whole point of Hebrews 11 is that true faith is the sort of faith that believes God despite the unconvincing, seemingly-contradictory circumstances. True faith—biblical faith—lays hold of what God has promised even though there is every earthly reason to not believe. Look at the author’s conclusion to the faith of Abraham and Sarah in Hebrews 11:13-16:

These all died in faith without having received the promises, but they saw them from a distance, greeted them, and confessed that they were foreigners and temporary residents on the earth. Now those who say such things make it clear that they are seeking a homeland. If they had been remembering that land they had come from, they would have had opportunity to return. But they now aspire to a better land—a heavenly one.

Take a look at the last verse in Hebrews 11 as well. Hebrews 11:39 really is the conclusion to Hebrews 11, identifying the sort of faith that pleases God. What sort of faith is it—the sort that confidently lays hold of heavenly treasure.

⁴ George H. Guthrie, *Hebrews: From Biblical Text... To Contemporary Life*, The NIV Application Commentary (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998), 388-89.

All these were approved through their faith, but they did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better for us, so that they would not be made perfect without us.

True faith is the sort of faith that believes God even though all of the circumstances suggest that God might not pull through. The point of Hebrews 11 is that true faith does not demand immediate fulfillment, but rather trusts in the midst of prolonged fulfillment. The faith puts confidence in God in the midst of prolonged fulfillment. True faith is the sort of faith that believes the promises of God even when the promises of God seem crazy to believe. The author of the Letter to the Hebrews gives his hearers a whole list of saints who had such faith.

Isn't this the problem of the Israelites in the book of Malachi? They lack faith! They do not believe that God will reward them for their obedience, even though just a few verses earlier he tells them,

Bring the full 10 percent into the storehouse so that there may be food in My house. Test Me in this way," says the LORD of Hosts. "See if I will not open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing for you without measure. (Malachi 3:10)

In this passage God is asserting the fact that their obedience is worth it—that He will pour out for them “blessing without measure” if they just trust and obey. But they do not believe that God richly rewards those who seek Him. They have concluded that serving God is worthless, profitless, a waste of time.

Listen to what Mark Allen Hahlen and Clay Alan Ham have to say about Israel's failure to test the promises of God.

“Yahweh instructs Judah to test the faithfulness of Yahweh to extend covenant blessings in tithes and offers, but instead they test Yahweh through their complaining, rebellion, and unbelief”⁵

Malachi 3:15

Let us quickly take a look at Malachi 3:15.

So now we consider the arrogant to be fortunate. Not only do those who commit wickedness prosper, they even test God and escape.

The Israelites are saying, “We are better off living like the pagans, after all they are more blessed than we are.” I guess the idols are better providers than God is. Really, they had a pragmatic approach to life. This is an all too common view of life in America. The biggest concern with people today is this, “What works? That's what I want. Just tell me what works; just tell me what benefits me the most in the short term.” As Derek Webb says in his song, *Ballad in Plain Red*, as he sings about the church in her market

⁵ Mark Allen Hahlen and Clay Alan Ham, *Minor Prophets Vol. 2: Nahum-Malachi*. The College Press NIV Commentary (Joplin: College Press Publishing Company, 2006), 571.

driven mentality, “What works verses what’s right. What’s the difference tonight. Hey alright.”

This is where most American’s are at. *They do not have the eyes of faith. They will only believe the promises of God if He gives them immediate confirmation of His faithfulness.* They only want to serve God if it works for them. They are near-sighted. They have no confidence in His character, His faithfulness, His promises. Because God is not “working” for them in the immediate, their conclusion is that He is not worth their time, effort, or energy. We are better off living like the pagans! But those who have the eyes of faith; those who can see beyond the grave, understand that we are not better off living like the pagans, because there will come a day when everyone will have to stand before God and give an account. And on that day He will separate the sheep from the goats. The sheep (those who had the faith of Abraham) will brought into the glorious riches of their master, and the goats (those who lived according to their own way) will be taken away to eternal destruction (Matthew 25:31-46).

Conclusion

Do you have the eyes of faith? Do you need immediate confirmation of the promises of God in order to believe that God’s promises are true? I am telling you right now that if you are near-sighted you will not find God to be all that satisfying. True faith is a faith which adopts God’s perspective and lays hold of the promises that He has given, believing that He richly rewards those who seek Him. This is where the Israelites fell short. They felt that they were wasting their time in serving God because it was not paying immediate dividends. Does your faith in God transcend bleak circumstances? Is your endurance in serving Christ only fueled by how blessed you feel at the moment, or do you have an ultimate faith that God rewards those who seek Him? Does your faith demand immediate fulfillment in the promises of God? To have the faith of Hebrews 11 you must trust that God will reward you for your faithful obedience even in the midst of prolonged fulfillment. Trust God’s word even when it is not immediately fulfilled.