

Malachi 3:18
Identifying the Righteous
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Sovereign Grace Fellowship: Sunday, October 4th, 2009

The Structure of Malachi 3:18-4:3

Malachi 3:18 is transitional in nature: it simultaneously sums up what God had to say to those in (what I have termed) the ‘holy huddle’ in 3:16-17 and introduces what follows in 4:1-3. Thus, it acts as both a conclusion and an introduction.¹ First, Malachi 3:18 stands as a conclusion to what went before; which is evidenced by the presence of the word “So” (or other translations render it as “And” or “Then”) in 3:18. The point being that God will spare those who fear Him His wrath and gather them as His special possession on the day that He is preparing, and this is what will be the distinguishing marker between the righteous and the wicked. The thing that will distinguish the righteous from the wicked is how God responds to them when He comes in His glory to judge all men.

Second, Malachi 3:18 also stands as an introduction to 4:1-3. In Malachi 3:18 God declares that a day is coming when the righteous will be distinguished from the wicked, then in Malachi 4:1-3 we see exactly how the righteous will be distinguished from the wicked. What is sufficiently evident is that this distinction will not be completely apparent until the second coming of Jesus Christ. As was evident in 3:16-17, the distinction that will be made between the righteous and the wicked in 4:1-3 will have everything to do with how God deals with them at His second coming. In 4:1 God declares that the wicked will undergo complete destruction—He uses drastic imagery to get across the idea that the wicked will be completely and utterly destroyed—then in 4:2-3 we get a picture of how God will deal with the righteous. So the correct way of reading 4:1-3 is by way of contrast. Thus, you are to read 4:1 and contrast it with 4:2-3, and in doing so you will see the heart of the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

This morning we are just going to be considering Malachi 3:18. We will be discussing two things: (1) the identity of the righteous and the wicked and (2) the nature of biblical service. So let us first consider the identity of the righteous and the wicked.

The Identity of the Righteous and Wicked

Notice in the second half of 3:18 that the identity of the righteous and the wicked has everything to do with service. The righteous are identified as those who serve God, while the wicked are identified as those who do not serve Him. I want to mention just two things about this fact. 1. I want to draw your attention to two truths that are easily seen in this passage:

¹ This is actually quite common throughout the Scriptures. I remember studying the book of Colossians in depth for the first time, wracking my mind over the flow of Paul’s thought in Colossians 3:1-4. I couldn’t determine whether Colossians 3:1-4 was an introduction to what followed or a conclusion to what preceded until I came to the brilliant conclusion that it served both functions. Colossians 3:1-4 makes no sense in the overall thought flow of Paul in Colossians unless it serves both functions, and thus Colossians 3:1-4 really should have something of a dual interpretation/application (it is best interpreted as a double entendre of sorts).

(1) the wicked are identified most principally by what they do not do while (2) the righteous are identified most principally by what they do do.

In other words, God does not identify the wicked by way of pointing to their wicked actions; rather, He identifies them by way of pointing to the absence of positive service in their lives, and conversely God does not identify the righteous in regard to what they do not do; rather, He identifies them by way of pointing to the presence of positive service in their lives. This sort of thinking does not gel with how we usually distinguish between the righteous and the wicked. We usually think along these lines: we identify the wicked most principally by the great wickedness that they do do (he is wicked because he murders or steals or commits adultery) while we identify the righteous most principally by what they do not do (he is righteous because he does not drink, smoke, dance, or cuss). Although the wicked can be rightly identified by their acts of wickedness and the righteous by their abstinence from evil, this is not necessarily how the righteous and the wicked are most principally identified.

Let us consider these two truths. First, the wicked are not primarily identified by the great acts of wickedness that they participate in. On the contrary, they are evidenced by their lack of service—they are identified by what they do not do. Thus, it is foolish to presume yourself to be righteous in God's sight (and thus *not* wicked) simply because you refrain from certain acts of evil. In light of this, I want to mention the fact that the CEV translation (Contemporary English Version) misses the mark on this verse. Notice how they render it:

Then everyone will once again see the difference between those who obey me by doing right and those who reject me by doing wrong.

This is not even 'sort of' wrong; it misses the point altogether. Surely, wrongdoing does equal unrighteousness, but the wicked in this passage are not identified by their positive wickedness *per se*, but rather by their lack of service. I would argue that the greatest act of rebellion against God is not found in the presence of sinful activity, but rather in the absence of righteous activity. Think of it this way: Paul Washer was once asked the following question by a curious student: "What is the greatest sin a person can commit?" Washer responded, "Well, what is the greatest commandment?" And we know what the greatest commandment is;

"Teacher, which commandment in the law is the greatest?" He said to them, "***Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important commandment. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments.***" (Matthew 22:36-40)

Thus, the greatest sin against God is not murder or drunkenness or robbery; rather, it is the absence of love—love for God and neighbor. All of the sins mentioned above ultimately flow out of a heart that lacks love. This is why Jesus can say, "All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commandments." This is why Paul can say in 1 Corinthians 16:22;

“If anyone does not love the Lord, a curse be on him.”

The Greek word for “curse” is *ἀνάθεμα* (*anathema*), the same word that is used in Galatians 1:8-9.

“But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach to you a gospel other than what we have preached to you, a curse be on him! ⁹ As we have said before, I now say again: if anyone preaches to you a gospel contrary to what you received, a curse be on him!

The word *anathema* literally refers to being assigned to hell, under the judgment of God. John R. W. Stott explains the seriousness of this word: “It was used in the Greek Old Testament for the divine ban, the curse of God resting upon anything or anyone devoted by Him to destruction.”² Alan F. Johnson suggests that this word ‘may mean either ‘devoted to a deity’ or ‘devoted to destruction, cursed.’” He then goes on to assert that “the basic sense in which Paul uses the term is ‘delivering up to the judicial wrath of God.’”³ The New Testament mentions two things which bring the anathema curse upon an individual: (1) a lack of love for God and (2) the preaching of a false Gospel. It is interesting that the anathema curse is not directed toward the murder or drunkard or prostitute—it is directed at the loveless, those who do not love God. Thus, it makes sense that the wicked are identified by Malachi in terms of what they do not do. They are not identified as those who do wickedness, but rather as those who do not practice righteousness.

Second, the righteous are *not* most principally identified as those who refrain from evil, but rather as those who commit themselves to the Lord, His work, and His reputation. It is an issue of positive service, not negative refrain. This is one of the greatest downfalls of the Christian fundamentalist movement. They were known for what they were against—for what they didn’t believe and do—as opposed to being known for what they did do and believe. This actually is quite horrible. The fundamentalists were known for what? For their stance against drinking, dancing, smoking, swearing, homosexuality, and abortion. Now we should be against evil (not that I would suggest that drinking, dancing, or smoking to be evil), but simply abstaining from certain acts of wickedness does not equal righteousness.

Let me illustrate with an orange. You walk into a room and see me there standing with an orange in my hand. You approach me and ask; “What is that in your hand?” I respond; “An orange.” You then decide to test my cognitive powers and ask; “How do you know that it is an orange?” I respond, “Well, I know that this is an orange because it is not long, slender, and yellow.” What would your response be? You would say, “Just because the object in your hand is not the same shape or color as a banana does not prove that it is an orange, it just means that it is not a banana.” Surely, you may not be Marilyn Manson, Joseph Smith, or Rosie O’Donnell, but you may be a Pharisee. Either way,

² John R.W. Stott, *The Message of Galatians: Only One Way*, The New Testament Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1968), 24.

³ Alan F. Johnson, *1 Corinthians*, The IVP New Testament Commentary Series (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2004), 321-22

neither Marilyn Manson nor the Pharisee are righteous. The Pharisee may be utterly opposed to every form of evil that Marilyn Manson, Joseph Smith, and Rosie O'Donnell engages in, but that does not make him righteous. Without a doubt, we should speak out against unrighteousness, but our greatest goal should be to be like Christ, not to be the exact opposite of the devil. In our pursuit to become like Christ, we surely will become the exact opposite of the devil, but we will go much further than that. Surely, you ought to abstain from evil, and speak out against injustice, but your greatest goal ought to be Christ-likeness. Simply abstaining from evil is not the chief aim of the Christian.

You simply cannot identify yourself by what you are against. If your view of Christianity has only to do with what you do not do, you will not be a contributor to the cause of Christ in the world. Most who focus primarily on what they do not do and what they are against, end up becoming useless to the kingdom of God.

Let me illustrate this truth further. In the midst of conversation I tell you that I am an exemplary son. You then ask me; "What makes you an exemplary son." I then respond; "Well... I have never cussed my parents out, I have never hit them, maliciously slandered them in public, and I have never stolen from them." How would you respond? You would say; "That doesn't make you an exemplary son—that just means that you are not an outrageously obnoxious son." The real test of whether I am an exemplary son has more to do with I do do than with what I do not do.

Thus it is with the identity of the righteous: they are identified more by what they do do than by what they do not do.

Turn with me to Galatians 5:22-23.

But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faith, gentleness, self-control.

What are the fruits of the Spirit: (1) The absence of hatred? No, the presence of love; (2) The absence of grief? No, the presence of joy; (3) The absence of hostility? No, pursuit of peace; (4) The absence of anxiousness? No, the presence of patience; (5) The absence of cruelty? No, the disposition of kindness (6) The absence of evil? No, the presence of goodness; The absence of doubt? No, active faith... You get the point...

Look at what Jesus says in John 13:35.

By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.

Notice that Jesus does not say; "By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you abstain from murder and promiscuity." The chief characteristic of the Christian is the presence love and what flows forth from love.

David and Paul are perfect examples of this fact. It is funny; one of the most common elements that can be found in the majority of the evangelistic conversations that I have had with the people of this world is the response I get when I ask the question; "Do you believe God will accept you into His kingdom after you die, and why?" The most common answer I get is; "Yes, I believe that God will accept me into His kingdom. I mean... I am not perfect, but it's not like I've killed anyone or anything." The horrible error in this all-too-common response is that two of God's greatest servants were guilty

of murder, David and Paul. You see, righteousness is bound up more in what you do than in what you do not do. Both David and Paul committed the biggies⁴ and yet they were righteous servants. Surely, they were repenters—they did abstain from evil, and when David committed adultery and murder, he repented of his sin. And yet, the reason why we identify them in the number of the righteous is because of their pursuit of the righteousness of Christ.

So, we must conclude with Malachi that the righteous are most principally identified by what they do do (they are those who serve God) and the wicked are most principally identified by what they do not do (their wickedness is bound up in the fact that they are not servants of Christ).

The Nature of Service

Next, we must ask ourselves what biblical service is. This is an important question; after all, the righteous and the wicked are characterized by whether they are servants or not. First, let me say that service, according to God, has nothing to do with empty religiosity—simply coming to church does not equal ‘service.’ We know this because the Israelites that Malachi preached to did far more than just simply come to church on Sunday; they frequented the temple on a daily basis, offering up animals without missing a beat; and yet their formal, life-less, religious activity did not qualify under God’s definition of “service.” The big question then is: What is God’s definition of ‘service’? Here is my crack at a definition:

According to God, ‘service’ has to do with laboring (or expending oneself) specifically as an act of worship. In other words, biblical service has to do with sacrificially laboring for the threefold purpose of 1. making Him look good, 2. expressing gratitude to Him, and 3. advancing His cause.

Any act of so-called “service” that does not contain each of these four elements (labor, glorifying Him, expressing gratitude, and advancing His cause) cannot be considered true, biblical ‘service.’ 1. If your labor on Christ’s behalf is not causing you to sacrifice anything, you are not a true servant. Now, busyness does not equal godliness, but convenient service that does not cost you anything (even if the cost is simply time or energy) is not biblical service. 2. If your sacrificial labor is not motivated out of a desire to make God look good, your service is not pleasing to God. 3. If you serve out of necessity or compulsion only, your service is not pleasing to God. This is not to say that we sometimes have to work at serving with joy, but as a general rule our service to Christ, if it is to be pleasing to Him, must be motivated by gratitude. 4. If you are laboring for Christ for the purpose of fulfilling your own agenda, your service is not pleasing to Him. This was another problem with Israel. They only served God in so far as He immediately gave them what they wanted. As soon as they sensed that God was not enlisting them in His service for the purpose of fulfilling their self-centered desires, they stopped serving.

In conclusion the Israelites service was not an act of worship; it was done under compulsion and had a self-centered aim. You see, the Israelites labored—they expended themselves in their religious duties at the temple complex—and yet their work was not

⁴ Those sins which our culture (but not necessarily the Bible) considers to be the worst of sins.

unto the Lord. They expended themselves for themselves, and used their worship as a tool to gain self-centered treasures.

Application/Conclusion

I want you to ask yourself this question, “Who do I serve? Am I a servant of Christ?” Be honest with yourself, and really answer this question in your head. Do you sacrificially labor in the service of Christ the King as an act of worship—is this the aim of your life? Are you a full time servant of Christ; whether you are at home, on vacation, at work, in the car, when you are alone, on the computer, at church—wherever you may be, doing what ever you are doing, do you see yourself as a servant of Christ actively engaged in His service as an act of worship?

I am not asking you if you have a flawless performance as a servant of Christ; rather, I am asking if this describes you at all. Why is this such an important question to answer? Because, this is how God distinguishes between the righteous and the wicked. If you cannot honestly say that you are a servant of Christ, no matter how good you have become at avoiding acts of unrighteousness, you are, according to God’s definition, wicked. Remember, the wicked are most principally identified as those who do not serve God.

Although many in the past have abused the call for and practice of ‘rededication,’ it can be a very helpful practice in the life of the Christian. The message preached this morning is a call to radical service to Christ. I want to challenge each and everyone of you to ask yourself whether you are a true servant of Christ or not. If you cannot honestly call yourself a servant of Christ, I sincerely ask you to consider the thought of rededicating your life to Him. This is not a decision of insignificant consequences—it is what distinguishes you in God’s eyes as either righteous or wicked.