

**Malachi 3:16-18**  
**(1 Peter 2:11-12; Matthew 7:24-27)**  
**“You Will See the Distinction”**

**Introduction**

Malachi speaks to a people who are disappointed with God. They think that they have done what the Lord requires: they have rebuilt the temple, brought their offerings, sung their songs, prayed their prayers, and studied their Scriptures. But God has not opened the windows of heaven and poured out his blessings on them the way that they expected him to do, and they have come to the conclusion that it doesn't pay to serve the Lord. Why, they ask, do people who do not serve the Lord seem to prosper, while God's people seem to struggle? If that is the case, why bother to serve the Lord at all?

Through his messenger, the Lord responds to their complaints. He assures them of his love for them, opening the prophecy with the heart-cry, “I have loved you!” He shows them that *they have not experienced the blessings of being his people simply because they have not cherished the privilege of being his people*. They have responded to his love with a religious formalism that tries to mask the disobedience of their hearts. It is, in fact, only because of God's unchanging faithfulness that they have not yet been destroyed (3:6).

And then, in the verses we have read, the prophet describes what happens when God's people begin to return to him with all their hearts: as promised, he returns to them, and those who are watching, wondering if God is real, begin “to see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not” (3:18).

There is a primary sense to these words that clearly refers to the end of history, to the final judgment, which is promised throughout Scripture, and is a cause for fear and anxiety to those of us who understand something of the awesome holiness of God and the awful sinfulness and rebellion of our own hearts. Here God promises that the day is coming when he will destroy the wicked (4:1), but that for those who are his, it shall be a day of salvation, when “the sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings. (4:1f).

However, there are also seasons throughout the history of humanity when God acts with such clarity and power that the distinction between God's people and the world around them is clear to all. We call such seasons times of revival or awakening or reformation and treat them as extraordinary, but they are what God always desires for his people. It is only in such seasons that we realize what we are meant to be. In our text, we see what happens when God's people, rather than complaining begin to listen and respond to God's call, “Return to me and I will return to you” (3:7).

## Body

### 1. What does it look like when we return to the Lord?

*We fear the Lord (3:16).*

*We esteem (lit. meditate on) his name (3:16).*

*We serve him (3:17&18).*

### 2. What does it look like when the Lord returns to us?

*He treasures us and treats us as his own children (3:17).*

*He makes clear those who are his and those who are not (3:18).*

*He rescues us from the judgment we deserve (4:2).*

### 3. How do we stand fast in this relationship of intimacy and trust?

*We look to his law (4:4).*

*We look to his Redeemer (4:5).*

*We look to our families (4:6).*

## Conclusion

What will we do with this prophetic word? Will we relegate it to the distant past, to Israel's history, to ancient literature, to a primitive people's view of God? We do that to our eternal peril. This word is as much for us as for Israel, as much for the people of Knoxville as for the people of Jerusalem. Remember God's cry in the middle of the prophecy: "I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed" (3:6). We children of Knoxville are not consumed because of the Lord's unchanging faithfulness and steadfast mercy.

At the end of the day, God gives us what we want: to those who want him, who long for his loving-kindness and esteem him above all others and all else, he gives himself in everlasting love and life. But to those who want him to leave them alone, to let them pursue their own desires without his influence or interruption, he also gives what they want: an eternity without him, the awful anarchy of humans no longer living under the restraint of his common grace: a city with no love, no beauty, no justice, no truth, all gentleness and mercy gone, for its source is gone. The distinction finally and eternally clear between those who have feared him, who esteemed his name and served him, and those who have not.

What of you? You are living toward one end or the other? Which will it be for you? "Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them" (3:16).

