

Malachi 2:17-3:12
(Luke 6:37-38; 2 Corinthians 9:6-15)
“Return to Me and I Will Return to You”

Introduction

We all do it: it may be a family crisis or a crucial project at work or an important exam or a big game. We determine to live the week in advance in a way that will please the Lord. We make sure to show up for worship and to put in an offering. We pray with particular zeal. In other words, we want the Lord to take notice of us, to be pleased with us, to reward us for our obedience. We revert to the ways and means of childhood when we wanted something from our parents.

This is what the people of Malachi’s day were doing. When times were hard, they said, Okay, let’s try doing what the Lord requires, and see if he’ll bless us. So, they went through the motions of obedience, pretending devotion to the Lord, when they were anything but devoted to him. And then, when God did not immediately respond by answering their every request, satisfying their every desire, they thought, “Why bother? What is to be gained from obeying the Lord?” They actually brought charges against God, and in our text, the prophet speaks up for God and answers their charges.

I wonder if some of us believe that God has been unjust toward us, and that he cannot be trusted to keep the promises we find in the Scriptures. I suspect that there are more than a few of us who have harbored resentment toward the Lord, and who need to hear Malachi’s words as the Lord’s word to us this morning, calling us to return to him, not in a sort of two-minute drill because we are facing some crisis, but to return to him for good, as a whole new way of living.

Sadly, our culture’s long-standing celebration of individualism has contributed to a widespread misunderstanding of the gospel as being mainly about personal salvation: Are you saved? Do you have assurance of eternal life? I’m not for a moment implying that those are illegitimate questions, but only that they miss the whole context of salvation in the Bible, from beginning to end.

The Bible is the story of God’s mission to redeem, not just individuals here and there, but to redeem the entire creation. “For God so loved the *cosmos*, that he gave his only Son, that who ever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life” (John 3:16). The context of salvation is a redeemed creation and a redeemed humanity, those from every tribe, language, ethnic group and nation, not simply a few fortunate who will be “beamed up” out of here while the rest perish.

So, we may well need – just as much as Israel needed in Malachi’s day – to hear this word that calls us out of self-absorption and into the grand, sweeping story of God’s redeeming love, not as mere observers, but as participants in salvation’s story.

Body

1. The accusation: There is no reason to believe in God's justice or faithfulness (2:17).

Why do the wicked seem to be favored by God? What is the substance of that charge? Well, aren't there times when the wicked seem to prosper and go unpunished? Isn't that what we typically see celebrated in the daily world news? What do we gain by obeying God's commands and serving him?

Isn't it those who seek to live lives pleasing to the Lord who are increasingly held in contempt in western culture? Hasn't the ground shifted significantly in the past half century? Actually, there is nothing new under the sun: the people of Malachi's day asked the same questions.

2. The defense: The problem is not with the Lord, but with his people (3:1-5).

The Lord is going to come and deal with injustice and wickedness. But, before you start celebrating, consider this: Who can endure the day of his coming? For judgment will begin with God's own household. Only because of God's unchanging faithfulness have his people survived to this day. Both his old covenant and new covenant people have a continuing history of unfaithfulness, and if our salvation rested on our faithfulness, we would have no hope. Nevertheless, while he does not change in his character or purposes, God does grow weary of the disobedience and constant complaining of his people.

3. The invitation: Return to me and I will return to you (3:6-9).

But how are we to return to the Lord? God's answer: Give me your treasure. What do you value most? What are you really trusting to make your life secure and good, a life worth living? Give me that. If you refuse, then realize that whatever you are ultimately trusting is your god, and you shall have no other gods but me, says the Lord.

This, of course, was Jesus' point in challenging the rich young ruler to give up his wealth and follow Jesus. He was exposing the young man's true god and challenging him to smash it to pieces. Israel was to tithe everything. Tithe means one tenth of everything we earn and have. There were, in addition, all sorts of offerings that the people of Israel brought that pictured aspects of their relationship with the Lord. And they were to be faithful in giving alms to the poor whenever they encountered people begging. In other words, they were to remember that God had redeemed them from slavery and that they were now his people, stewards of all that he had entrusted to them. And as

Malachi already reminded them in chapter one, they not only have failed to tithe faithfully. When they have given, it has not been their first and best, but their last and least. The whole tithe signified that Israel understood its unique relationship to the Lord, as his covenant people.

While the law of the tithe applied to the old covenant and not to the new, the new covenant calls for a higher commitment to stewardship, the stewardship of all we have and are in service of God's mission (e.g., 2 Corinthians 8&9), so that even our bodies are the Lord's (1 Corinthians 6:19f) and even our eating and drinking is to be for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31).

4. The promise: I will bless you, and through you the nations will be blessed (3:10-12).

Test me, says the Lord, and see how I will bless you. The testimony of God's people down through the ages who have given generously to his work is of a joy and spiritual prosperity that could not be experienced through any other strategy of investment. This is not to subscribe to the "prosperity gospel." If you are a faithful steward of what is entrusted to you, you will not necessarily become wealthy with the things of this world. But you will have all you need, and will enjoy it beyond the enjoyment of those who live for the things of this life, and so can never get enough.

And, says the Lord, I will also bless the nations through you. When God blesses his people, and his people realize that they are blessed in order to be a blessing to the nations, then the nations rejoice, and have reason to believe the good news of God's grace. Israel's calling was to show the nations what it looked like to worship and serve the Lord. Our calling is also to be a demonstration of the power of the gospel to transform both individuals and a community of Christ-followers, as we walk together in the unity and love of God's Spirit and in grateful obedience to his Word. And, we are to take that message in word and deed to the nations. This is the goal of God's mission entrusted, first to Israel, then fulfilled in the perfect Israelite, Jesus, and passed onto those who are his from every people group on earth.

Conclusion

What of you? Do yet have "skin in the game"? Are you yet part of that mission for which you were created and redeemed? I was sad to learn this past week that only 600 of us are giving regularly in support of the global outreach of this congregation. That means that thousands of members of this congregation are not part of our mission to the nations of the world. Yet this is what the gospel is all about. This is one of the chief ways that we join the great story at the heart of the meaning of human history: "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting

their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us the message of reconciliation” (2 Corinthians 5:19).

So perhaps this word is just what we most need to hear today. Don't miss being part of the only mission with eternal consequences in its reach to the ends of the earth. Israel forgot why God had chosen them – as a light to the nations. We dare not forget. You may think that you simply cannot be a part of the mission at this time. You are already stretched too thin financially. God knows what we have and never asks for what we don't have. But he does expect us all to grow as stewards of what he has entrusted to us.

God calls us to return to him with all our heart and then invites us to put him to the test. Are you willing to trust the Lord with the very things – your wealth, your talents, your time, your affection – upon which this world rests its hope and confidence? If you've tried the world's way and it's let you down, why not try a different path? “Return to me,” says the Lord, “and I will return to you.”

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