



Sunday School Lesson Summary for August 26, 2007
Released on August 22, 2007

"Malachi Described God's Just Judgment"

Printed Text: Malachi 2:17–3:5; 4:1

Background Scripture: Malachi 2:17–4:3

Devotional Reading: Psalm 34:11–22

SCRIPTURE LESSON TEXT: Malachi 2:17-3:5; 4:1

Malachi 2:17

17 Ye have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet ye say, Wherein have we wearied him? When ye say, Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?

Malachi 3:1-5

1 Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the Lord of hosts.

2 But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap:

3 And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the Lord an offering in righteousness.

4 Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the Lord, as in the days of old, and as in former years.

5 And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the Lord of hosts.

Malachi 4:1

1 For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn as an oven; and all the proud, yea, and all that do wickedly, shall be stubble: and the day that cometh shall burn them up, saith the Lord of hosts, that it shall leave them neither root nor branch.

Lesson Aims

After participating in this lesson, each student will be able to:

1. Summarize what Malachi said in response to questions about God's justice.
2. List some ways that a lack of commitment to doing right wearies the Lord today.
3. Make a plan to resist one cultural trend that opposes God's expectations for justice.

Introduction - Now Go do the Right Thing

Laura Schlesinger's radio program has become one of the most well known and most listened to in the highly competitive world of talk radio. Her no-nonsense approach, characterized by a strong emphasis on Judeo-Christian values, has gained her a significant following. At the end of each hour of her broadcast, "Dr. Laura" concludes with this brief but compelling advice: "Now go do the right thing."

Such counsel seems simple. Yet there is no question that if listeners really took it to heart and applied it to their circumstances, they would avoid numerous heartaches and tensions. Perhaps Dr. Laura would find herself with far fewer callers to deal with!

Today's lesson comes from Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament. Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet chronologically, is the final messenger of God to address God's people before the gap of 400 years until the New Testament era begins. As we will see today, the book of Malachi closes the Old Testament with an appeal from God that is appropriate for His people to hear, whether in an Old Testament or a New Testament setting. It may be summarized as, "Now go do the right thing."

Lesson Background

Malachi's circumstances were somewhat different from those of the other prophets we have studied this quarter. Yet the basic thrust of what all these men of God had to say is the same: being part of God's covenant people means much more than basking in a special status. God expects a certain lifestyle of those who lay claim to that status. One of the primary tasks of God's prophets throughout the Old Testament was to call His people to account when they failed to carry out their sacred responsibility.

Not much is known about Malachi himself. One bit of information is his name. In Hebrew it means "my messenger"—a theme that will become crucial in today's text. We must examine information within the book itself to learn the time in the history of God's people when Malachi likely prophesied.

Such an investigation points to the time of Nehemiah as perhaps the best fit for Malachi's ministry. This is because many of the sins highlighted in the book of Malachi are the same sins that Nehemiah had to confront. These included indifference toward the kind of sacrifices required by the Lord (Nehemiah 10:37-39; Malachi 1:6-14), disregard for the Lord's teaching concerning marriage (Nehemiah 13:23-27; Malachi 2:14-16), and the bringing of tithes and offerings to support the Lord's work (Nehemiah 10:37-39; 13:10-13; Malachi 3:8-10). Furthermore, the mention of a governor in Malachi 1:8 fits well with Nehemiah's time, since he was recognized by that title (Nehemiah 5:14).

Nehemiah had traveled to Jerusalem primarily to spearhead efforts to rebuild the wall of the city (Nehemiah 2:1-11). This was approximately 100 years after the Jews had first returned from captivity in Babylon, and about 70 years after the second temple had been completed through the encouragement of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah. Yet when Malachi was ministering, much of Jerusalem was still in ruins. The people had become discouraged and spiritually lethargic. Apparently many were wondering whether the Lord really loved them, because Malachi began his book with assurance that He did: "I have loved you, saith the Lord. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? ..." (1:2).

Today's Scripture from Malachi focuses on his challenges to God's people in his own day. But it also highlights a portion of his glimpse into the future and of what God planned to accomplish through a messenger far greater than Malachi—the Lord Jesus Christ.

Justice Needed (Malachi 2:17 - 3:2)

1. What format did Malachi use in prophesying to Israel? (Malachi 2:17)

The prophet Malachi is famous for his question-answer format in his book. Much of Malachi is written as if the Lord is engaging His people in a dialogue. Malachi pictures the Lord as making a statement, then he pictures the people as challenging the statement. The Lord then responds to the challenge. In so doing He calls attention to an area of His people's relationship with Him that they have neglected. Examples of these dialogues are found in Malachi 1:2, 6, 7; 2:13, 14; 3:7, 8, 13-15, as well as in the verses before us.

2. What did Malachi mean when he said the people wearied God? (v. 17 a,b)

Here Malachi claims "ye have wearied the Lord with your words." One may ask how this can be true in light of Isaiah 40:28, which declares, "Hast thou not known? hast thou not heard, that the everlasting God, the Lord, . . . fainteth not, neither is weary? There is no searching of his understanding."

But there is no contradiction. The Lord does not grow weary in the sense of losing His power, strength, or majesty; He can become weary (meaning frustrated and disappointed) with the behavior of His people and their refusal to heed His call to change.

One can understand why the people would want to know how they have wearied the Lord. Have they spoken blasphemous, angry, or lying words? Have they been practicing what Jesus would later call "vain repetitions" (Matthew 6:7)? Is God concerned because their lives are not consistent with their words? What's the deal?

3. What were the wrong thoughts the people had about God and how He was treating them (v. 17c)?

Since they were not willing to accept this accusation from Malachi and since they asked what words he referred to, he quoted them: "Everyone that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delighteth in them; or, Where is the God of judgment?"

The people had a misunderstanding of God. They saw evil prospering all around them. Other nations seemed to be getting away with sinning against God, and it appeared that God was even blessing them. Meanwhile, Judah was still struggling among ruins. They were wondering why God had not come to their aid and given them relief. They did not take into account that they were acting sinfully as well (as mentioned in the lesson background).

It is important to remember that God does not act on our timetable; He acts on His perfect will and timing. Psalm 73 addresses this question and comes to a conclusion. Read it for encouragement.

4. Why would God's people speak so critically of the Lord?

At this point in Old Testament history, God's people have been back in the promised land for nearly 100 years. They know the words of the prophets who had spoken of a glorious new day for God's people. That day is to be ushered in by the coming of the Branch (Isaiah 4:2-6; 11:1-3; Jeremiah 23:5-8; 33:15, 16). They know of God's promise to "set up one shepherd over them, and he shall feed them, even my servant David" (Ezekiel 34:23).

But where is this special person? When will He come and do all that the prophets had said He would do? God's people had finished the temple many decades previously. Hadn't a prophet declared that at that time the Lord would "fill this house with glory" and that "the glory of this latter house shall be greater than of the former" (Haggai 2:7, 9)? The people have done their part-why hasn't the Lord done His? Where is His glory?

5. How did the Lord answer the people? What did Malachi say would happen at the coming of the Messiah? (Malachi 3:1)

The Lord proceeds to answer the challenge. He has not forgotten His promises. "Where is the God of judgment?" He is coming, but He will not come without a messenger to prepare the way before Him.

Earlier we noted that the name Malachi means my messenger." Here the Lord promises another messenger. This messenger, who is identified as John the Baptist in the New Testament (Mark 1:1-4), was going to prepare for the first coming of Christ.

The concept of preparing the way for a dignitary was well-known among Old Testament people. It was custom for the king to send messengers to remove obstacles or stumbling blocks that would hinder his travel. This included removal of any stones from the road over which they were to come. The idea is found in Isaiah: "Cast ye up, cast ye up, prepare the way, take up the stumbling block out of the way of my people" (57:14).

The Lord, who would make His appearance "suddenly" (depicts how most people are caught off guard when He arrives) in the temple, was also the "messenger of the covenant" the people wanted to come. The words "whom ye seek" and "whom ye delight in" refer to the people's general expectation of the Messiah's coming.

6. Why would it be very difficult to endure the coming of the Lord at His second advent? (3:2)

As God's prophets often did, Malachi suddenly looked ahead to the second coming of the Messiah. It is common to see the two advents of Christ in the same context in the prophets' writings. The two questions in this verse are asked not in order to produce an answer but to challenge people to think. Lest people become too complacent about the Lord's promised coming, they should realize that when He comes He will make some serious changes!

The Lord will indeed come, but He will come with a different agenda than the people expected. The Messiah would be "like a refiner's fire, and fullers' soap." This indicated that the Lord is going to purify His people spiritually. A refiner worked with metals that needed to be purified. He used a hot fire to heat the metal to the point that all alloys and dross were separated from it and could be skimmed off. The fullers' soap (an alkaline lye) is used to cleanse, bleach, and sometimes whiten cloth, thus removing all impurities from it. Both processes involved harsh treatment.

Thus it is easy to see why the question is raised as to who can *abide* or *stand* such treatment. The sins from which people need to be cleansed are too numerous to

count. This messenger of the covenant comes to perform what in today's terms would be considered an extreme makeover—on the inside.

7. In what areas of your life has God had to apply His refining fire and purifying soap? How is your life better as a result? In what areas do you still need God's purification?

When we surrender our lives to Christ according to the biblical plan of salvation, we are cleansed from our sin guilt. Yet even after that cleansing, we carry with us some residual effects. The Holy Spirit has to continue to work in our lives, refining and cleansing. Paul spoke of his continual struggle with sin even after becoming a follower of Christ (see Romans 7:19).

God promises, "If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins" (1 John 1:9). There are areas for each of us to recognize our sin, confess it to God, and allow Him to do His cleansing work. It may be the sin of gossip, lust, greed, or pride. We are not able to conquer these sins on our own; we need the refining power of God.

Judge Present (Malachi 3:3-5)

8. Why were the sons of Levi mentioned as being purified? (Malachi 3:3)

The sons of Levi include the priests, who have already been called to account for having "caused many to stumble at the law;" corrupting "the covenant of Levi" (Malachi 2:8). The priests have also been charged with offering blemished, unacceptable offerings to the Lord (1:6–10). All of this will change when the Lord's purifying work has been accomplished.

These verses describe another dimension of the consequences of Jesus' work as the "messenger of the [new] covenant" (Malachi 3:1).

9. What will be different about future offerings given to God? (v. 4)

God only accepts offerings from His people when they are done with a righteous heart. After God has cleansed the people, their offerings will once again be pleasant to Him. It had been this way at the beginning, when God told the people through Moses how they were to bring and offer their sacrifices. In "*the days of old and former years*" the people brought sacrifices from their pure and giving motives. They had a heart of worship, and God was pleased with their acts of worship. This was a period in the history of God's people when there was a greater consistency between the sacrifices they offered and the lives they lived. This would have been true during the reigns of godly kings such as David, Hezekiah, and Josiah.

It is important to remember that God will not accept just any offering. Even though we are living under grace, God expects us to give acceptable offerings. All Christians need to live a holy and righteous life. We will make some mistakes, and God's grace will cover us, but we cannot offer our service to God if we are not willing to give up

our sinful ways. He expects us to live holy unto Him (Leviticus 19:2). Only then will our worship be acceptable unto Him.

10. How will God judge the wicked? (V. 4)

While some will choose to accept the refiner's cleansing fire, others will refuse to undergo the purifying process. Those who refuse will one day learn, to their ruination, that the fire of refinement can also become a fire of *judgment*.

Several of the sins mentioned in this verse bring to mind some of the Ten Commandments as listed in Deuteronomy 5. These include the actions of *adulterers* (Seventh Commandment), *false swearers* (Ninth Commandment), and *those that oppress the hireling*, or worker, in his wages (this amounts to stealing, a violation of the Eighth Commandment).

To engage in the practices of *sorcerers* could violate the First Commandment, which prohibits the worship of other gods. The neglect of *the widow*, *the fatherless*, and *the stranger* is forbidden in Exodus 22:21, 22; Deuteronomy 24:17–22. All of these sins (indeed, any sin) can be traced to one root cause: they are the consequence of failing to “fear” the Lord.

Recall how our printed text began with Malachi alluding to the people's inquiry: “Where is the God of judgment?” (Malachi 2:17). The verse before us gives the answer: He will come, and His judgment will be “swift” when He does come. Malachi's words are reminiscent of what Peter writes concerning Jesus' return in 2 Peter 3:9, 10. “The Lord is not slow in keeping his promise, as some understand slowness. He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance.”

Judgment Rendered (Malachi 4:1)

11. To what is the extent of God's future judgment likened? (Malachi 4:1)

This verse also emphasizes the certainty of coming judgment. Both the attitudes of *the proud* and the actions of *all that do wickedly* are highlighted. Earlier prophets had used the terms *root* and *branch* as the basis for prophecies concerning the coming Messiah (Isaiah 4:2; 11:1; Jeremiah 23:5; 33:15). Now we see that this judgment pronounced by Malachi will be so complete as to leave *neither root nor branch*.

Thus we have seen today's text describe the impact of both the first and second comings of the messenger of the covenant—Jesus. With His first coming, He initiates a ministry of cleansing and purifying through His sacrificial death on the cross and

His resurrection. That ministry continues through the testimony of faithful Christians who bear witness to what Jesus can do for others through the gospel message.

At His second coming, however, the refining ministry of Jesus will mean judgment upon those who have not accepted for themselves His cleansing power. It is similar to saying that those who do not acknowledge Jesus as the "chief corner stone" (1 Peter 2:6) will find Him to be "a stone of stumbling" and "a rock of offense" (1 Peter 2:8). The kind of rock and the kind of refiner that Jesus will be for us is up to us. It's our choice!

Conclusion - Right Makes Might

The phrase "might makes right" is familiar. This reflects a belief that the strong or those in positions of authority generally gain the upper hand because of their ability to exercise sheer force. The supremacy they possess due to these factors gives them the power to determine what is "right" and to enforce their will on others.

The more biblical view (and the theme of today's study) is that "right makes might." When an individual is committed to doing right in the sight of the Lord, he or she gains a sense of accomplishment and purpose that not even the mightiest "might makes right" advocate can possess.

We began with a reference to Dr. Laura's oft-heard counsel, "Now go do the right thing." Consider how often Jesus gave essentially the same challenge. After telling the parable of the Good Samaritan, Jesus said, "Go, and do thou likewise" (Luke 10:37). He told the disciples after washing their feet, "I have given you an example, that ye should do as I have done to you" (John 13:15).

Have you learned some important lessons from your studies this quarter? Sit down and make a list of the top ten lessons you have gleaned. With each one, list an action step that you can take in order to apply that particular insight. And then—"Go, and do thou likewise."

Prayer

Father, forgive us when we fail to do right. Forgive us for those times when a Christian's influence was needed—yet we remained silent and inactive. May we follow the example of Jesus, "who went about doing good" (Acts 10:38). May our light shine in this sinful world. In Jesus' name, amen.

Thought to Remember

“Wrath is not a defect in the divine character; rather, it would be a defect if wrath were absent from Him. Those who see God’s wrath as petulance or retaliation, inflicting punishment just for the sake of it or in return for some injury received, do not really understand it. Divine wrath is not vindictiveness; it is I divine perfection, issuing forth from God because it is right.

Human beings tend to make God in our own image. This is where we so often go wrong. He made us in His image.

Thus, when thinking of the wrath of God, we tend to look at what happens in our own hearts when we get angry, and we imagine God to be the same. But divine anger must never be confused with human anger. Most of what goes on in our hearts whenever we are angry is a mixture of unpredictable petulance, retaliation, hostility, and self-concern. God’s anger is always predictable, always steadfast, and always set against sin. We must never forget that God’s nature is uncompromisingly set against sin. We may tolerate it; He never. As His children we ought to rejoice that He will not tolerate anything that is harmful to us.” – Selwyn Hughes “Every Day with Jesus”
~The Character of God.

Anticipating Next Week's Lesson

Our next lesson begins a new quarter, and takes us to the first chapter of Genesis, where God's creation of the universe is described. Study Genesis 1:1-25.

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