

Pentecost +23
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Malachi 3:13-4:6

In name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Every so often, some former Christian singer or writer or even a mega-pastor will announce that they're leaving the faith. They'll say they cannot live a lie any longer. Their announcement in the press is often treated as courageous, that finally people are standing up in their unbelief. But sadly, it's a loss for them. It's a loss of hope. And ultimately, it's a loss of love.

Keep this in mind as we're reading Malachi. Malachi is writing to a people who are voicing doubt in God's faithfulness. Possibly it was written during the exile or right after the exile. So it's not necessarily the last thing that was written, but it's the last text in our Old Testament. And in the book he is writing to the people who are openly questioning God, even the clergy are. The priests of their day are openly questioning God. Most people remember Malachi because it's a favorite to be used to try to collect tithes. "If you bring your tithes into the storehouse, I will show you." But that is a side note for the larger question of the people who have grown weary in well-doing. So you keep that in mind.

It's written to a people who are weary in well-doing. So in our text today we hear, "'Your words have been hard against me,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How have we spoken against you?'" He says, "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God. What is the profit of our keeping His charge, with walking in mourning for the Lord of Hosts? Now we call the arrogant, blessed. Evildoers not only prosper but they put God to the test and they escape.'"

So today's [inaudible 00:02:30] those who walk away from the faith are nothing new. All throughout history there are people who have questioned faithfulness and goodness to God. Even in this case, spoken out against the Lord. So the first thing they say is that it's vain, which if you're familiar with the third command, "Thou shall not take the name of the Lord in vain." They're kind of reversing it and saying to follow the Lord is vain, it is worthless, it's [inaudible 00:03:03]. It doesn't really mean anything.

And then they go further and they say, "If you try to follow the commands of the Lord or try to fast at appropriate times, it makes no difference. There's no difference. You won't get any special award. In fact, there's no difference between you and the wicked because the wicked are never going to be judged. It doesn't matter." So these people have completely grown weary in well-doing. They are questioning the goodness of God.

And this is an actual danger the Scripture calls attention to again and again of people who grow weary, grow bitter, turn against the ways of the Lord. I thought of Proverbs 2 as I was meditating on this. Proverbs 2 is offering the young man wisdom to prevent this happening. So Proverbs 2 opens like this. "My son, if you receive my words and treasure my commandments within you, make your ear attentive to wisdom, incline your heart to understanding, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, if you seek it like silver, search for it as hidden treasures, then you will understand the fear of the Lord and find the knowledge of God."

And after this little opening in Proverbs 2, it continues and talks about two potential dangers that understanding and having the fear of the Lord and the knowledge of God will protect the young man from. The first one is from those who have become disillusioned and have turned against the ways of the Lord and have become wicked. And then the other danger is seductiveness, to be seduced from the path. But either one is to lead him away from the path. So the godless are waiting [inaudible 00:04:59] on the sidelines. This young man is walking the faith and the godless are tempting the young man to turn away from the way of faith, to give up, to lose faith, to walk a different path, the path that will lead into darkness.

And so this hints at a aspect of teaching that the Bible returns to again and again is the two ways, the two paths, the path of light and the path of darkness, the path of life and the path of death. Moses sets out two ways for the children of Israel right before they're going into the Promised Land. So in Deuteronomy you have one of his final sermons telling them, "If you walk in the path of faithfulness to the Lord, you walk in the path of blessing." And in the first part of Deuteronomy 28, Moses recounts a series of blessings that they would experience as they walk in this path. Then he says, "If you turn away and walk away from the path of the Lord, you forget the covenant, then you will walk in the path of cursing." So the second half of Deuteronomy 28 is [inaudible 00:06:17] long blessings of Deuteronomy 28. So you have one way, a way of blessing, one way, a way of cursing.

And then here's one simple verse in Proverbs that highlights, once again, the two paths. One of my favorite verses from Proverbs, Proverbs 4:18 and 19. "The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn which shines ever brighter and brighter until the full light of day. The way of the wicked is like deep darkness. They do not know over what they stumble." So once again, two paths, two ways. One being upward into the light and what I like about this Proverbs passage is the image of the sun coming up until the full light of day, until the sun is overhead. And so there's the image of growing in insight and knowledge of truth as one walks in the way. And so language of way, path, all this is story language about being obedient to the way of the Lord. And so when Jesus says, "I am the way, truth, and the life," He is the path that's entering into the fullness of His life. And the disciples growing in knowledge and truth step by step or as Paul says, "From glory to glory."

Now the early church liked this image of the two ways. We don't always talk about the two ways or think of it and frame it that way, but that was a big way of framing the way of discipleship was two ways, the way of life and the way of death. And so one of the early writings we have from the church in the first or second century is the Didache or the teaching of the apostles. And this really is a series of little points about the life of faith that one would read out loud. So here's a little of it.

The Didache opens this way, "There are two ways. One is the way of life, the other one's the way of death. There's a mighty difference between these two ways." It says, "The way of life is this, first you shall love the Lord, love God who created you. Second, love your neighbor as yourself. All those things you do not want to be done to you, don't do them to others. The training about these words is this, bless those who curse you. Pray for those who are your enemies. Do fasts for those who persecute you. What benefit is there if you love those who love you? Do not even the Gentiles do that? Rather you must love those who hate you and so you are not to treat the other as your enemy." And then it continues in just little phrases that one would read out loud and hear it, a way of meditating on the way of faithfulness, the way of discipleship.

It is kind of interesting some of the things he says because it talks about... I thought it was a little bit humorous. It talks about, "Giving to those in need, but be cautious in giving that you don't give to somebody who is deceiving you or they will be under judgment." And then it says, "It's okay to hold on to something until your hands sweat," which is kind of funny. The Didache is really something we might all find helpful. You can find online.

Now let's get back to Malachi and the two ways. He's giving us an image of the two ways. You've got one group of people who are saying, "It's not worth your time to follow the way of the Lord. It's vain. It makes no difference whether you're wicked or righteous." And they've grown pretty disillusioned at this point. And then you have another group. These people have the fear of the Lord.

It says in our reading as we continue reading in Malachi, "Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another." It didn't tell us what they said but it tells us that God is listening. It says, let's see, the Lord hears them and pays attention to what they've said. And then He goes on to write a book of remembrance about these people who feared the Lord. So you have two groups: one is like many

people who are popular this day, who come out against faith. They are saying it's a waste of time. But you have this other group who are quietly encouraging one another. That's what I would get out of here. They're encouraging one another, exhorting one another in the Lord. But they're not making a big show of it because it doesn't even tell us what all they said. They're obviously faithful because the Lord hears them and He's writing a book of remembrance about what they're saying.

So now we live thousands of years later from this era and yet the same kind of world is around us. We hear all kinds of voices in the culture. Those on the one hand who make light of faith. There's a writer several years ago came out with a book, Charles Taylor, who talks about the secular age we live in. That is we live in an age when so much of even our language has been stripped of anything to do with faith. So many people in our culture, especially the Western culture, have sort of like a bubble around them. It's like they have this little bubble that nothing spiritual can get through the bubble. It sort of a secular protective bubble. So it's a dangerous world we live in and yet there's still people worshiping, who gather to worship today. So there's still faithful Christians trying to seek the Lord and hear the voice of the Lord.

And so as we walk through this world, how do we live as faithful people? How do we continue to be formed to Christ in potentially a world that we when we go out into it and interact whether it be online, in our job place, depending on where you work, I may be bombarded with doubt and unbelief. So it may even cause us to question. Is God faithful? Has God forgotten me? Is He not going to help me in this situation? There's all sorts of questions we may struggle with in ourselves. And these are real questions of faith we face.

I have always found Psalms 73 helpful in this because the psalmist takes the same questions that the doubters are airing to the public and he turns them into prayer. So in Psalms 73 the psalmist is saying, "God, is there no difference between me and the ungodly? Is it just the same?" He feels as though his God has forsaken him. And then in the middle of this prayer, he has this beautiful, beautiful cry. "Whom have I in heaven but You? There's nothing on earth I desire besides You. My flesh and my heart may fail but God is the strength of my heart and my portion forever." By the end of this psalm, he sees that there is a day of accounting between the wicked and the righteous and God is faithful.

And that's what Malachi said today. There is a day of accounting. There is a distinction between the righteous and the wicked. And so he says, "Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, when all the arrogant and the evildoers will be stubble. The day is coming that shall set them ablaze," says the Lord of hosts. And I'm a person of mercy, so I want mercy for everybody but we still have to see the text says that there's clearly a day of judgment, a day of accounting, a day of separation.

And so in this day of accounting it is a vindication for the faithful. In this day of accounting God will not forsake His people. So he goes on to say, "For those who fear my name, the sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in his wings. And you shall go out leaping like calves from the stall." So this is an image of absolute joy in this day of accounting.

Our reading is actually a gleam of hope to the faithful, encouraging us to gird up our faith as we are bombarded by voices of doubt in culture. We look for strength in the goodness of God. I was thinking of what I might call rhythms of hope. And this is much of sort of the liturgical pattern that this is far as the way the year goes, it's the way as far as our weekly readings, as far as our personal daily lives, sort of a rhythm of trust. It strengthens us for these moments of darkness and doubt. Simple rhythms, I mean, it's nothing complicated. It's just like meditating on the Word, sort of soaking in it, letting it sort of just refresh us and renew us. It's not always getting knowledge, it's reading things we know and just going back over again and again, letting it soak in. The pattern of praying the Psalms as we were talking about Venerable Bede this morning, in translating the Psalms and praying. He's one of the early ones in church

history that was really teaching people to pray the Psalms. He wrote a little booklet on praying the Psalms.

The pattern of thanksgiving, of the discipline of always giving thanks to God. Hopefully these little, simple patterns, they're going to shape us in the hour of need. The pattern of serving one another, of fellowshiping with God's people. All these little simple things we know. The problem is we don't know them but these are rhythms that deepen us in the trust of the Lord so that when we hear the alien voices that would try to lead us astray or when we face those dark moments, the joy of the Lord comes out of us, the thanksgiving of God comes out of us. That we are being formed and it's not in a dramatic event that changes us.

Often, it's little habits of thanksgiving that slowly lead us, that strengthen us to walk over a long period as opposed to just some moment. So that when the time of challenge comes, and they often do come, some disaster affects us, something terrible, something happens to the culture, whether it's the economy or health or any number of things, these rhythms are so deeply built within us that what comes out is love for God, love for one another. We're unshaken. We can lift our voice in praise to the goodness of God in the land of the living.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.