

The Minor Prophets
Lesson 12: The Sins of God's People—Part II
(Malachi 2:17— 4:6)

As Malachi continued his message, the people continued their resistance to God's truth. They had already argued with him about God's love (1:2), God's name (v. 6), and God's teaching about marriage and divorce (2:14); and now they would argue about three other matters, the justice of God, giving to God, and serving God. People who argue with God rarely receive blessings from God. It's when our mouth is stopped, and we submit to His will that we can experience the grace of God (Rom. 3:19).

But Malachi didn't stop preaching; he went on to deal with these "sins of the saints."

Questioning God's Justice (2:17— 4:6)

"You have wearied the Lord with your words," the prophet said; and they replied, "How have we wearied Him?" (2:17 NIV). Of course, God never gets weary in a physical sense because God doesn't have a body (Isa. 40:28), but He does grow weary of some of the things His people say and do. The hypocritical people in Israel wearied God with their iniquities (43:24), and the Jewish remnant in Malachi's day wearied Him with their words.

Their words were cynical and skeptical. "We came back to the land, rebuilt the temple, and restored the worship," they said, "and look at the difficulties we are experiencing! Why isn't God keeping His promises? Where are all the blessings He promised through His prophets?" It was the age-old problem of "why do the righteous suffer while the wicked prosper?" Job and his friends wrestled with it, and so did Asaph (Ps. 73), Jeremiah (Jer. 12), and Habakkuk.

But these skeptical Jews had forgotten the terms of the covenant and the conditions laid down by the prophets: If the people obeyed God's law, God would bless them with all they needed. But they were divorcing their wives, marrying pagan women, offering defiled sacrifices, robbing God of tithes and offerings, and complaining about having to serve the Lord! For God to bless the people like that would mean approving of their sins. The Jews didn't need justice; they needed mercy!

Malachi answered their question "Where is the God of justice?" by speaking about two messengers.

1. "My messenger"—John the Baptist (v. 1a).

- a. As we've seen, the name Malachi means "my messenger"; and the messenger referred to in this statement we know as John the Baptist. Speaking of John the Baptist, Jesus said, "For this is he of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send My messenger before Your face who will prepare Your way before You'" (Matt. 11:10 NKJV; see Mark 1:2 and Luke 7:27).
- b. While Malachi was the last of the writing prophets, John the Baptist was the last and the greatest of the old covenant prophets. To John was given the unique privileges of ministering at the close of the old dispensation and the beginning of the new, and it was John who presented Jesus to Israel (John 1:29-31).

- c. Like Jeremiah and Ezekiel, John was born into a priestly family but was called of God to be a prophet. He was also a martyr, for he gave his life in the work God called him to do (Matt. 14:1-12).
- d. The prophet Isaiah had also written about John's ministry (Isa. 40:3-5; Mark 1:3; Luke 3:4-6; John 1:23).
- e. The image is that of people preparing a way for the king to come, leveling the roads and removing the obstacles so that the king might enjoy an easy and comfortable trip. John prepared the way for the ministry of Jesus by preaching the Word to the crowds, urging them to repent of their sins, baptizing them, and then introducing them to Jesus.

But how does this answer the question "Where is God's justice for His people?" When Christ came and died on the cross, He completely satisfied the justice of God. He paid the penalty for the sins of the world and vindicated the holiness of God. Nobody can ever truthfully say, "God isn't just!"

The cross of Christ is proof that the same God who ordained "the law of sin and death" (Gen. 2:15-17; Rom. 6:23; 8:2-4) also "took His own medicine" (to quote Dorothy Sayers) and willingly died for sinners. Because of Calvary, God is both "just and justifier" of all who trust Jesus Christ (3:26).

2. "The Messenger of the covenant"—Jesus Christ (3:1b—6).

- a. The first prophecy refers to our Lord's first coming in grace and mercy, but this prophecy speaks of His second coming in judgment.
 - b. When He comes, He will prove that God is just by purifying His people and judging rebellious sinners. Jesus Christ is the "Messenger of the covenant" in that He fulfilled all the demands of the covenant in His life, suffered the penalties in His death, and rose from the dead to usher in a new covenant of grace (Jer. 31:31-40; Matt. 26:26-30; Heb. 8:6-13).
 - c. All the covenants in Old Testament history unite in pointing to Jesus Christ and His marvelous work of redemption.
- Why would a message about coming messengers resonate with the people? How was Malachi's message of particular significance to those who were awaiting a Messiah? What does this book teach us about the way God's plan fits together across history?

3. An unannounced coming (3:3).

- a. The Messiah's second coming will be sudden and unexpected, and its purpose will be the judging of sinners and the establishing of His kingdom on earth. "But of that day and hour no one knows, not even the angels of heaven, but My Father only" (Matt. 24:36 NKJV).
- b. "For when they say, 'Peace and safety!' then sudden destruction comes upon them, as labor pains upon a pregnant woman" (1 Thess. 5:3 NKJV).

4. An unprepared people (3:1).

- a. The phrase "whom ye delight in" suggest that the Jews in Malachi's day were hoping that "the day of the Lord" would come soon, not realizing what a terrible day it would be for the whole earth. His listeners were like the people in the days of Amos, the prophet who had the same false confidence that they were ready for the promised "day of the Lord."

- b. Amos warned them, “Woe to you who long for the day of the Lord! Why do you long for the Day of the Lord? That day will be darkness, not light” (Amos 5:18 NIV; and see vv. 19-20).
- c. When the Jewish remnant of that day read the prophets, they saw only the promises of blessing and not the warnings of judgment. They overlooked the prophecies that described worldwide terror when the wrath of God is poured out on sinners.
- d. The Israelites were not unlike some Christians today who talk about the coming of the Lord as though seeing Him will be more like beholding a visiting celebrity and basking in his or her glory. Standing at the judgment seat of Christ will be an awesome experience, even though we know that we have a place reserved for us in heaven.

5. An unclean nation (3:2-4).

- a. Malachi asked, “But who may abide the day of his coming?” and then described what the Messiah would do when He came: He would purify the Jewish nation, especially the priests, and bring swift judgment to the sinners who arrogantly disobeyed His law.
- b. In the law of Moses, God provided three ways for people and things to be cleansed and made acceptable to God: water, fire, and blood. There is no mention here of blood because Jesus Christ died for sinners at His first coming. But He would wash the unclean nation like a launderer washes dirty clothes. He would purify the tribe of Levi the way a jeweler purifies precious metal in his furnace.
- c. Once the nation is cleansed and the priests are purified, then they can become an acceptable sacrifice to the Lord (Mal. 3:4), and He will be pleased with them. The priests in Malachi’s time were offering sacrifices that were unacceptable (1:7-8), and the priests themselves were unacceptable, but in that great day, God’s Messenger would make His people “living sacrifices” that would be acceptable to the Lord (Rom. 12:1).

6. An unsparing judgment (3:5).

This list of sinners gives us some idea of the kind of practices that were going on in Malachi’s time and will be going on in the end times. All of them are contrary to God’s law.

- a. Sorcery is forbidden because it means trafficking with demons (Ex. 22:18; Lev. 20:27; Deut. 18:14). The “satanic revival” that’s going on today indicates that many people aren’t heeding God’s warnings as they dabble in witchcraft and other demonic practices. In fact, witchcraft is a legal religion in many places.
- b. As for adulterers, we have already heard Malachi’s message to the men who divorced their Jewish wives to marry pagan women. “Thou shalt not commit adultery” (Ex. 20:14) is still in the Bible no matter what marriage laws permit.
- c. “False swearers” describes people who commit perjury by lying while under oath. Perjury violates the third commandment, “Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord thy God in vain” (v. 7), and the ninth commandment, “Thou shalt not bear false witness against thy neighbor” (v. 16).
 - I. Trust is the “cement” that holds society together, and when that cement crumbles, society falls apart.
 - II. If we can’t trust one another’s words and promises, then how can we live and work together safely?

- d. The oppressing of the poor and needy is a sin that the prophets condemned with vehemence and it needs to be condemned today. God has a special concern for widows and orphans who are exploited and laborers who don't receive their wages (Ex. 22:22-24; Lev. 19:10; Deut. 10:17-19; Jer. 7:6; James 5:1-8).

7. An unchanging God (3:6).

- a. What was the reason for these social abuses? The people who committed them had no fear of the Lord. They thought that God was like themselves, that He would close His eyes to their sins and not judge them for breaking His law. "You thought that I was altogether like you; but I will rebuke you" (Ps. 50:21 NKJV).
- b. The Jews should have been grateful that God was unchanging in His nature, His purpose, and His promises, for if He were not, He would have consumed them for their sins. Twice Moses used this truth about God as his argument when he interceded for the nation (Ex. 33:12-23; Num. 14:11-21).
- c. The same principle applies to believers today, for 1 John 1:9 states that God is "faithful and just to forgive our sins." God is faithful to His promises and just toward His Son who died for our sins that we might be forgiven.

Malachi has proven that God is just. Now he discusses the fact that the people are unjust in the way they've robbed God of what rightfully belongs to Him.

Robbing God's Storehouse (3:7-12)

If "like people, like priest" (Hos. 4:9) applied to the spiritual leaders of the nation, then like father, like son" (or "like mother, like daughter") applied to everybody else. From the days of the patriarchs until Malachi's time, the nation frequently disobeyed God's Word, and God had to send prophets to call them to repent and return.

When the people heard Malachi call them to return to the Lord, instead of obeying that call, they began to argue with God's servant. They evaded the issue by asking questions such as, "What do you mean by return?" But Malachi didn't hesitate to tell them how to start returning to God: "Bring God the tithes and offerings that are rightfully His!" Theirs was the sin of robbery in at least three different areas.

1. They were robbing God (vv. 7-8).

- a. The needs of the priests and Levites were met from the sacrifices and also from the tithes and offerings brought to the temple by the people.
- b. The word tithe comes from a Hebrew word that means "ten." A tithe is 10 percent of one's grain, fruit, animals, or money (Lev. 27:30-34; Neh.13:5). There were special storage rooms in the temple for keeping the grain, produce, and money that the people brought to the Lord in obedience to His law. If the people didn't want to carry heavy produce all the way to the temple, they could convert it into cash, but they had to add 20 percent to it just to make sure they weren't making a profit and robbing God (Lev. 27:31).
- c. The annual tithe was given to the Levites (Num. 18:21-24), who in turn gave a tithe of that income to the priests (vv. 25-32). When a worshipper brought his tithe to the temple, he

could use part of it to enjoy a special meal with his family and the Levites (Deut. 12:6-7, 17-19). Every third year, a tithe was to be brought to the leaders locally to be used for the poor (14:28-29).

- d. Tithing as an act of worship is as old as Abraham, who gave tithes to Melchizedek, acknowledging that Melchizedek was the representative of the Most High God (Gen. 14:20; Heb. 7). Jacob vowed to God that he would tithe (Gen. 28:22), so tithing antedates the law of Moses. However, tithing was officially incorporated into the law of Moses as a part of Israel's worship.
- e. In bringing the tithes and offerings, the people were not only supporting the ministry of the temple, but they were also giving thanks to God for His bountiful provision for their own needs.

Over the centuries, many of the Jews committed two errors with regard to the tithe: (1) the legalists obeyed the law so scrupulously that, like the Pharisees, they even tithed the minute garden herbs (Matt. 23:23-24), all the while thinking that their obedience would earn them righteousness before God; (2) the irreligious neglected the tithe and by disobeying God deprived the temple ministry of what it needed to keep going. When Nehemiah returned to Jerusalem, the temple storerooms were empty of produce and many of the priests and Levites had abandoned their service to go back home and work their fields in order to care for their families (Neh. 13:10).

- f. Since God made and owns everything, He doesn't need anything that we can bring Him (Acts 17:25). But when we obey His Word and bring our gifts as an act of worship with grateful hearts, it pleases Him.
- g. While 1 Corinthians 16:1-2 suggests proportional giving ("as God has prospered him"), there is no express command to tithe given to the church in the New Testament. Paul teaches "grace giving" in 2 Corinthians 8-9, which is certainly beyond 10 percent.
- h. Many Christians feel that if believers under the old covenant brought their tithes, how could Christians under the new covenant begin with anything less.

2. They were robbing themselves (vv. 9-11).

- a. In robbing God, the people were not fulfilling the covenant they had made with the Lord; therefore, God couldn't fulfill His promise and bless them (Lev. 26:3). "The Lord will command the blessing on you in your storehouses and in all to which you set your hand, and He will bless you in the land" (Deut. 28:8 NKJV). Insects had invaded the land ("the devourer," Mal. 3:11) and the grain and fruit were not maturing.
- b. Whenever we rob God, we always rob ourselves. To begin with, we rob ourselves of the spiritual blessings that always accompany obedience and faithful giving (2 Cor. 9:6-15). But even more, the money that rightfully belongs to God that we keep for ourselves never stays with us.
 - i. It ends up going to the doctor, the auto body shop, or the tax collector.
 - ii. "You have sown much, and bring in little... and he who earns wages, earns wages to put into a bag with holes" (Hag. 1:6 NIV).
 - iii. If we don't trust God to care for us, whatever we do, trust will prove futile.
- c. People who lovingly give tithes and offerings to God find that whatever is left over goes much further and brings much greater blessings.

- d. Giving is an act of faith, but God rewards that faith in every way. That isn't the reason we give, because that kind of motivation would be selfish. We give because we love God and want to obey Him, and because He's very generous to us. When we lay up treasures in heaven, they pay rich dividends for all eternity.

The promise in Malachi 3:10 was linked to the covenant the Israelites had made with the Lord (Deut. 28:1-14), so if they faithfully obeyed Him, He would faithfully keep His promises. But the spiritual principle behind the promise is echoed in Luke 6:38 and 2 Corinthians 9:6-8, so believers today can lay hold of it. For some Christians in America, a tithe would be much too small an amount, but each believer must be fully persuaded in his or her heart what the Lord wants him or her to do.

3. They were robbing others (v. 12).

- a. The remnant that returned to Judah after the exile had a great opportunity to trust God and bear witness to the other nations that their God was the true and living God.
- b. Had the Jews trusted the Lord, He would have done great things for them, and they would have been a testimony to others. As it was, they floundered in their faith and nobody could look at them and call them blessed.
- c. God's promise was, "The Lord will establish you as a holy people to Himself, just as He has sworn to you, if you keep the commandments of the Lord your God and walk in His ways. Then all the people of the earth shall see that you are called by the name of the Lord, and they shall be afraid of you" (Deut. 28:9-10 NKJV).
- d. The Gentiles would have come to Jerusalem to learn about this great and wonderful God who could take a group of refugees and turn them into a blessed nation.

Despising God's Service (3:13—4:6)

This is the sixth and last of Malachi's accusations: "You have said harsh things against me, says the Lord" (3:13 NIV). As he closes his book, he points out four different groups of people and what they said and did.

1. The complainers (3:13-15).

- a. These people were guilty of saying "harsh things" against the Lord. For one thing, they felt that serving the Lord was drudgery; it was "futile" to be His servants.
- b. The priests may have been the leaders in this complaining, but the common people were just as guilty. "We're not getting anything out of it!" was their grievance. "Things just keep getting worse."
- c. Some believers complain about their churches saying, "We're not getting anything out of it!". But a church is like a bank or a home; You don't get anything out of it unless you put something into it.
- d. We serve God because it's the right thing to do, not because we're rewarded for our service. (We shall be rewarded, but that's not our main motive.)
- e. But they had a second complaint: The pagan people around them who didn't know the Lord were in better shape than the people of Judah! The wicked were prospering, while the godly were suffering.

- f. It would have been difficult for the Jews to prove that they were “godly,” because they were guilty of disobeying the Lord. God would have blessed them if they had yielded themselves to Him, but they preferred to have their own way and then complain about what didn’t happen.

It’s a serious thing to serve the Lord, and we’re commanded to “serve the Lord with gladness” (Ps. 100:2). It’s a sad thing when servants of God drudge, merely doing a job because that’s what they have to do or for what they get out of it. Philippians 2:1-12 is God’s portrait of Christ, God’s ideal Servant, and His example is the one that we should follow.

2. The believers (3:16-18).

There was a group of true believers in this remnant, and they remained faithful to the Lord. They feared the Lord, which means they held Him in awe and worshipped Him as the Lord Almighty.

- a. They met together, not to complain but to encourage and edify each other.
- b. They spoke about the Lord, and they weren’t afraid for Him to hear what they were saying!
- c. Their assembly probably wasn’t a large one, and they may have thought that very little was happening because they met and worshipped, but God was paying attention and keeping a record of their words. Their neighbors may have laughed at them, but God was pleased with them. They weren’t wasting their time because they were investing in eternity.
- d. God claimed them as His own, and God promised to spare them in the future judgment when everybody would see that there is a difference between the righteous and the wicked and that this difference is important.
- e. One of the sins of the priests was that they failed to make the distinction between the way of holiness and the way of sin. To them, one sacrifice was just as good as another, yet they were supposed to teach the people “the difference between the holy and the common and show them how to distinguish between the unclean and the clean” (Ezek. 44:23 NIV).

Many of God’s faithful servants become discouraged because the times are difficult, the crowds are small, and their work seems to be unappreciated. People who aren’t really walking with the Lord seem to be getting more attention than are the faithful servants. But the day will come when God will reveal “his jewels” (“treasured possession,” NIV; see Ex. 19:5; Deut. 7:6, and then the faithful will receive their reward. Every discouraged servant of God needs to read and ponder 1 Cor. 4:1-5.

3. The evildoers (4:1-3).

- a. Once again, Malachi returns to the theme of the coming day of the Lord, when God will punish all evildoers. Sinners will be burned up the way fire eats up the stubble; they will become like ashes under the feet of the saints!
- b. But the true believers will see the dawning of a new day as the “Sun of righteousness” rises (Mal. 4:2; see also Luke 1:78-79). Then Jesus will reign as King of Kings and His people will frolic like calves let out of their stalls!

4. The preachers (4:4-6).

Malachi has been faithful as God's messenger, and he closes his book by reminding the people of two other faithful prophets, Moses and Elijah. The law of Moses was still God's rule of life for the Jews, and if they obeyed, God would bless them. Of course, believers today aren't under the law (Rom. 6:15; Gal. 5:1-4), but they still practice the righteousness of the law through the power of the indwelling Spirit of God (Rom. 8:1-4).

- a. The promise in Malachi 4:5 was often discussed and debated by the Jewish rabbis, who asked, "Who is the Elijah whom the Lord will send?" The Jewish leaders interrogated John the Baptist about it (John 1:19-21); and Peter, James, and John asked Jesus about it (Matt. 17:10).
- b. The prophet Elijah is mentioned at least thirty times in the New Testament, and ten of those references relate him to John the Baptist. But John the Baptist said plainly that he was no Elijah (John 1:21, 5). He did come in the "spirit and power" of Elijah and turn the hearts of fathers and children (Luke 1:16-17).
- c. Like Elijah, John was a courageous man, a man of prayer empowered by the Spirit, a man who lived alone in the wilderness, and a servant who turned many people back to the Lord, but he was not Elijah returned to earth.

However, for those who believed on Christ during His earthly ministry, John the Baptist performed the work of Elijah in their lives: He prepared them to meet the Lord. "And if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who was to come" (Matt. 11:14 NIV). "Elijah is come already," said Jesus, "and they knew him not." The disciples understood Jesus to mean John the Baptist, who came in the spirit and power of Elijah (17:10-13).

- a. But Malachi 4:5 promises that Elijah Himself will come, and that his coming is related to the "day of the Lord" that will burn the wicked like stubble (v. 1). That's why Jesus said, "Elijah truly shall first come, and restore all things" (Matt. 17:11).
 - b. Many students believe that Elijah is one of the two witnesses whose ministries are described in Revelation 11:3-12. (They believe the other is Moses.)
 - c. It is also worth noting that both Moses and Elijah appeared with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration (Matt. 17:3), which explains why the three apostles asked about Elijah.
 - d. Inasmuch as "the great and terrible day of the Lord" did not occur in the New Testament times, we have to believe that John the Baptist was not the promised Elijah, even though he ministered like Elijah.
 - e. It may well be that Elijah will return to earth as one of the two witnesses (Rev. 11:3-12), for the signs that these two men will perform remind us of the miracles of Elijah. After the ministry of the witnesses, the Lord will pour out His wrath upon the earth (v. 18; 16:1) and the day of the Lord will burst upon the world in its fury.
- Review Malachi 4:4-6. Because "the great and terrible day of the Lord" did not occur in New Testament times, many believe that John the Baptist was not the promised Elijah. Does that mean this particular prophecy has yet to be fulfilled? What does that mean for Christians today? What does that say about God's ultimate plan for His people—and all the details of that plan?

It seems odd that the Old Testament Scriptures should end with the word *curse*. When we get near the end of the New Testament, we read, “And there shall be no more curse” (Rev. 22:3). All of creation is eagerly awaiting the return of the Savior, expecting Him to deliver creation from the bondage of sin (Rom. 8:18-23). We too should be expecting Him and, while we’re waiting, witness of Him to others. For when the “Sun of righteousness” arises, it will mean either burning or blessing (Mal. 4:1-2); blessing to those who have trusted Him, burning to those who have rejected Him.

Nobody can afford to argue with God the way the Israelites did when they heard Malachi, because God will always have the last word. For you, will that last word be salvation or judgment?

Looking Inward

- Take a moment to reflect on all that you’ve explored thus far in this study of **Malachi**. Review your notes and answers and think about how each of these things matter in your life today.
- Have you ever witnessed corruption in the church? If so, what did you do about it? How comfortable would you be speaking out about something that was obviously wrong and sinful in the lives of church leaders or others in positions of influence? What would be the proper way to speak out about this?
- Malachi was determined to share the message God gave him, despite all the obstacles in his way (particularly the defiance and disagreement of his audience). Describe a time when you stood firm amid turmoil about something you believed in. What role did your faith in God play in that situation? How can God’s love give us the confidence to speak boldly in the face of disagreement?
- What are some ways you’re helping widows and orphans? Why do you think prophets were particularly upset when widows and orphans were ignored? If you’re not doing anything to help them today, what can you start doing?

Going Forward

- Think of one or two things that you have learned that you’d like to work on in the coming week. Remember, this is all about quality, not quantity. It’s better to work on one specific area of life and do it well than to work on many and do poorly (or to be so overwhelmed that you simply don’t try).
- Do you want to better understand Malachi’s prophecies about the messengers to come? Be specific. Go back through Malachi and put a star next to the phrase or verse that is most encouraging to you. Consider memorizing this verse.

Seeking Help

- Write a prayer below (or simply pray one in silence), inviting God to work on your mind and heart in those areas you’ve noted in the Going Forward section. Be honest about your desires and fears.

Homework: Read the book of Haggai . Next week we will look at “**Stirring Things Up,” Haggai Chapter 1.**