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Questioning God's Care

Malachi 3:13-18

The Psalter opens with a didactic psalm which was given in part to instruct God's people as to the slippery slope of "bad company."

Psalms 1:1: "How blessed is the man [recall the word for 'blessed' in the Hebrew refers to the one we ought to envy as Christians and so endeavor to emulate] who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked, nor stand in the path of sinners, nor sit in the seat of scoffers!."

This psalm brings with it a twofold progression. The first progression involves the child of God and so the warning against “walking with”, “standing in the way”, and then “sitting amongst” bad company. The second progression relates to the “bad company” who here are identified as “the wicked”, “sinners”, and then “scoffers”. Recall, the first refers to compromised Christians; children of God NOT struggling against sin BUT living in it. Raising the Defcon level a bit, the Psalm references “sinners” who are ones who have built up a reputation for rebellion. Think of the prostitute who washed Jesus’s feet (Luke 7:34).

Yet the highest level when it comes to the “bad company” of this text are the “scoffers.” These are ones who NOT ONLY have given themselves to sin BUT make fun of the things of the Lord. Scoffers are NOT content to tell off-colored jokes; the focus of their jokes involve God, His Kingdom, and His people! They have an overt hostility toward God.

Another word used in the Bible for someone who sits in judgment over God is the “fool”- who typically is the non-Christian.

Psalms 10:4; 14:1; 53:1, “The fool has said in his heart, ‘There is no God.’”

The word for “fool” is נָבָל (*nabal*) which comes from נָבַל (*nabel*) which speaks of “the extinction of life in men, animals, and plants.” For example, it is used in Isaiah.

Isaiah 40:7, “The grass withers, the flower fades...”- the word for “fade” is the root of “fool.”

What happens when a flower fades? It loses that which makes it lovely, beautiful, and useful. The one who stands as judge over God, in the words of Stephen Charnock, is one who “...is void [not of] rational faculties, as of grace in those faculties; not one that wants reason, but abuses his reason.” (Spurgeon, 2004, p. 166)

Now lest we in our arrogance judgmentally look down upon the “scoffer”, recall that their sin lies in our heart as well. We are born as critics of God! As such, it is NOT only the “scoffer” BUT all of us for in our hearts we have the tendency to set ourselves over and against God by which we criticize Him!

The sixth exhortation God gives His people in this book is aimed at our tendency to criticize the Lord¹ — in this case, His Care/Goodness. As we have seen, the criticism addressed is endemic of those whose hearts have grown cold toward the Lord! When that occurs, it isn’t long before we begin to criticize God on account of His care for His people. Before we address the formal accusation, notice the soil where this sin arises.

[The Soil, v. 13- from whence this sin arises...](#)

Malachi 3:13a, “Your words have been arrogant against Me,’ says the LORD....”

The word for “arrogant” is *chazaq* and is the primary word in the Hebrew to denote the idea of “strength.” We read it in Joshua where God tells Joshua this:

Joshua 1:6-7a, “Be strong and courageous, for you shall give this people possession of the land which I swore to their fathers to give them. Only be strong and very courageous...”

And yet the word is used NOT only to denote “strength”, BUT also for strength in the extreme and so is translated as “severe” (Genesis 41:56), “steadfast” (Joshua 23:6, RSV), or “catching hold” (2 Samuel 18:9). However, when used of one’s relationship with another, it carries the idea of “arrogantly overruling.” In 2 Samuel we read of David who disagreed with the advice of Joab, David’s general.

2 Samuel 24:4, “Nevertheless, the king’s word prevailed against Joab and against the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king, to register the people of Israel.”

That is getting close to the idea in our text. Though God’s word is a “a lamp to [our] feet, and a light to [our] path” (Psalms 119:105), the people of Malachi’s day “overruled” it with their will, desires, teaching, and counsel- which is the height of arrogance! The Psalmist speaking of God and His people wrote this:

Psalms 106:43, “Many times He would deliver them; they, however, were rebellious in their counsel [In other words, they didn’t submit to God’s word, BUT chose to do it their own way] and so sank down in their iniquity.”

Through the prophets God gave His people the way of life, BUT His people “knew better” and so did it their way. The result is that they “sank down in their iniquity” just like the people of God in Malachi’s day!

Accordingly, the NASB is NOT a bad translation, “Your words have been arrogant against Me,” so long as we understand how this arrogance manifested itself. God’s people came to the place where they subjected God’s word or twisted God’s word to suit their own purpose, will, and desire.

That’s the soil from which all accusations arise in the heart of man against God. God’s word no longer is our rule, our authority. It becomes good advice, and then irrelevant advice, and then bad advice! Now what makes this so insidious is that the people of Malachi’s day came to this point in their walks with God, and yet they didn’t recognize it. They were in rebellion and didn’t know it!

Malachi 3:13b, “Your words have been arrogant against Me,’ says the LORD. Yet

you say, ‘What have we spoken against Thee²?’”

This is the same pattern we’ve seen throughout this prophecy. God confronts His people with regard to their sin — as in worship, the pulpit, their fellowship, and the like — and they say, *“What are you talking about? We aren’t doing that!”*³ It reminds me of Proverbs.

Proverbs 14:12, “There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way of death.”

From this take note of the subtlety of sin, with Peter (Matthew 16:22), it will lead us to the place where we rebuke the Lord for something He said or does- and NOT even notice that what we did was wrong!

If I could exhort you when it comes to your relationship with God: adopt the conviction which Paul exhorted in Romans.

Romans 3:4b, “...let God be found true, though every man be found a liar.”

Let God remain as He is described in Scripture, both sovereign and good, holy yet near, exacting yet kind! Don’t allow yourself a moment in which you meditate upon critical thoughts about God — for you will only be feeding your sinful nature!

That being said, if ever you should have a criticism of God, like the Psalmist, bring it to the Lord in prayer! See, God is NOT opposed to criticism, He gave many Psalms for that very purpose — to give us both the words and the way to approach God when we have a problem with Him. And so, the soil from which critical thoughts are harbored against God is the soil of “arrogance” where we subject God’s word/will to our standard of right and wrong to our valuation of what is good, better, or best.

[The Accusation, vv. 14-15.](#)

God speaking to His people:

Malachi 3:14, “You have said, ‘It is vain⁴ to serve God; and what profit⁵ is it that we have kept His charge⁶ and that we have walked in mourning before the LORD of hosts?’”

The heart of this complaint revolves around the word “vain.”⁷ The word means light (as in weight) and so empty, useless, or meaningless. It is as the paralyzing fog covering seven city blocks 100 feet deep, and yet only contains one glass of water! That is the idea of “vanity”- all show, no substance!

And so, after engaging in their religious duties for generations AND having received as

“compensation”/ “profit” (in their mind) trial and difficulty, they concluded that there was no benefit in serving God! There was “no profit” in worshiping God, obeying His word, praying, and the like. The last statement in this verse is noteworthy, “...we have walked in mourning⁸ before the Lord of hosts.”⁹ Recall, what did God call His people to in the last section? “Return to Me [repent], and I will return to you!” (Malachi 3:7b) Well guess what? God’s people responded to this by “mourning”- literally “putting on clothes that are dark”! In other words, in response to God’s call to repent v. 7, God’s people dressed in mourning clothes, put on a sad face, and sported a dour expression.

Yet this wasn’t true repentance! They hadn’t turned from themselves to loving, knowing, and trusting God. Their repentance was what was “vanity”- nothing more than a show... simply “worldly grief” (cf. 2 Corinthians 7:10).

Malachi 3:15, “So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up, but they also test God and escape.”

These are three strong statements each of which comes with the implied accusation that God is unkind, unloving, and uncaring! In each is housed a comparison between God’s treatment of the wicked and His treatment of His people.

- The wicked?... *why they are “blessed,” “built up,” and their sin is “ignored”!*
- The child of God?... *it is just the opposite!*

And that leads us to the theme of this section: *“God doesn’t care about His people! He cares more for the wicked than His own!”*

Do you ever think these thoughts about God?¹⁰ I have!¹¹ Now we know such thinking is wrong, BUT why? Let me ask you, what is God doing in this era when it comes to His people? Along with His redeeming movements of grace in which He saves the elect, God is preparing each of us individually for the final age in which we shall walk with God in the New Heavens and Earth! As such, we must understand that now is the time for tempering, preparing, and establishing us in the faith! And so, we read the exhortations of God.

Acts 14:22, Paul was, “Strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, ‘Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.’”

Why is that?

Hebrews 12:6-7a, 11, “For those whom the Lord loves He disciplines, and He scourges every son whom He receives. It is for discipline that you endure... All discipline for the moment seems not to be joyful, but sorrowful; yet to those who have been trained by it, afterwards it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness.”

Yet why must it be so painful? So humbling? It is because “when we are weak, that is when we are strong” in the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)! What is the largest obstacle to us becoming a man or woman of God? Our sinful disposition which in part...

- Sits in judgment over and so seeks to control God.
- Seeks fulfillment NOT from loving, knowing, and serving the Lord, BUT from doing what we want!

So, what does trial, difficulty, and hardship do? It weans us from our love-affair with ourselves and this world AND SO opens us to the transforming grace of God! That is why we read this:

James 2:5, “...did not God choose the poor of this world to be rich in faith and heirs of the kingdom which He promised to those who love Him?”

Matthew 5:3-4, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.”

Judges 7:2: “And the LORD said to Gideon, ‘The people who are with you are too many for Me to give Midian into their hands, lest Israel become boastful, saying, “My own power has delivered me.”’”

So, what did God do? He winnowed Gideon’s strength down to where it was nothing! It was here that Gideon would rest solely on God for His deliverance! Again, it is “when we are weak, that we are strong” in the Lord (2 Corinthians 12:8-10)!

In light of this, how ought we to process the blessing which God seems to lavish upon the wicked and rebellious of this world? David gave the answer when he wrote this:

Psalms 37:1, “Do not fret because of evildoers, be not envious toward wrongdoers. For they will wither quickly like the grass, and fade like the green herb.”

That is exactly where Asaph landed in his struggle.

Psalms 73:16-18, “When I pondered to understand this [God ‘blessing’ of the wicked], it was troublesome in my sight until I came into the sanctuary of God; then I perceived their end. Surely Thou dost set them in slippery places; Thou dost cast them down to destruction.”

It reminds me once again of the words of Spurgeon, “If we were pigs for slaughter, God would fatten us with the easiest of life and the choicest of days.”

The Restorative Cure, v. 16

How do we recover from being critical of God's care? The answer given here is twofold — of which we only have time to look at the first one; fellowship.

Malachi 3:16a, "Then those who feared the LORD spoke to one another..."

This is marvelous! Throughout this prophecy, we have NOT read of the response of God's people to any of the exhortations given here.

It may be that with each prophetic discourse, God's people were so deceived by their sin that they did NOT respond positively. But that is speculation. What we do know is that the text before us contains a glorious response on the part of some of God's people at this time.¹²

Then those who feared the Lord: in the Bible, there are primarily three words translated as "fear"- "dread" (פָּחַד [pachad]- Isaiah 33:14), "trembling" (אָרַץ [arats]- Deuteronomy 7:12), and "reverence, awe" (יָרֵא [yare]- Malachi 3:16). The latter is what is used here.

After Malachi's exhortation in vv. 13-15, there was a portion of God's people who responded in love and reverence for God. They received the rebuke and it resulted in healing, encouragement, and growth in their love for the Lord! How did it work?

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another: this is a significant addition. If you step back from the verse, you could remove the statement and we would still walk away with the understanding that some amongst God's people at this time responded positively to the message preached.

So, what does this expression do for our understanding? It gives us the medium in which the "fear of the Lord" rested upon those who repented. And what is that medium? It is the medium of fellowship!¹³

And that is the focus of the first part of v. 16. The message God gave at this time through Malachi did NOT simply rest upon the individual minds and hearts of God's people such that they went home to their prayer closet and contemplated what they heard. Many in the church today respond this way to the pulpit. And do you know what we call them? Those who struggle in the faith! Listen to a very important exhortation found throughout Scripture:

Hebrews 3:12-13, "Take care, brethren, lest there should be in any one of you an evil, unbelieving heart, in falling away from the living God. But encourage one another day after day, as long as it is still called 'Today,' lest any one of you be

hardened by the deceitfulness of sin.”

You and I must understand that Christianity is a team sport! NEVER are we merely to contemplate the truth of God’s word alone! Of course, it starts there, BUT it must always lead you and me to fellowshiping with others around what we have heard and are learning.

Genesis 2:18b, “It is not good for the man to be alone...”

Did you get that? Isolation is never good for image bearers! When we are isolated, our minds can take a thought and go crazy with it. John Calvin wrote of this statement:

The commencement, therefore, involves a general principle, that man was formed to be a social animal. [And] although God pronounced, concerning Adam, that it would not be profitable for him to be alone, yet I do not restrict the declaration to his person alone, but rather regard it as a common law of man’s vocation, so that every one ought to receive it as said to himself, that solitude is not good... (Calvin, 2011, p. 128 Emphasis added)

And so, we read the command this:

Hebrews 10:24-25, “And let us consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near.”

None of us in our walks want to go to the dark place of Criticizing God’s Care. Accordingly, let us receive this verse as an exhortation to seek out actively the fellowship of God’s people... to seek community!

Now there no doubt will be those listening who think that they are the exception. That they do fine in their isolated life. Yet don’t forget: dysfunction blinds us to reality and health- which brings us back to the first point. God’s people in Malachi’s day had become so habituated to their sin that when they were rebuked by God as clearly as could be, they said, “*What are you talking about! We aren’t doing that!*” And what was God’s subsequent charge? Arrogance!

And what is meant by the word used here for “arrogance”? It is when we place our thought, opinion, or desire above God’s word and judge it as irrelevant, impractical, or incorrect.

So again, let us heed the calling. God’s word says community/fellowship is essential to our well-being as Christians. It was that in part which in our text brought God’s people back to the Lord.

That leads to a final word of encouragement. It is so easy to gather on Sunday and take the easy way out and so talk in response to the conversation given. If the subject is work, sports, Covid, the economy you are happy to listen and even engage. Yet this falls short of biblical fellowship. Biblically speaking, the root of “fellowship” is “commonness” and so has reference to that which every Christian in every place has in common with one another... and that alone is Christ and His word!

Accordingly, take it upon yourself each week when you gather for worship to do more than simply go through the religious motions. Rather work and labor to go through them with others and so talk of the Lord when you “sit in your house and when you walk by the way and when you lie down and when you rise up” (Deuteronomy 6:7)!

This will take work, diligence, and a deliberateness on your part. Yet eventually it will become part of your weekly/daily routine! And once it is instilled, there will be a built-in fence to keep us from falling away from the Lord! It was this fence that made the first difference when it came to God’s people here.

Note(s)

¹ “This point is vividly made by the specific complaint of the people and God’s response to it recorded in Malachi 3:13–15. These verses contain the last of those seven cavils marked by the word *how* (or, in this case *what*) that provide one possible outline of the book. When God said, ‘I have loved you’ (Malachi 1:2), the people replied, ‘*How* have you loved us?’ When God said, ‘It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name’ (Malachi 1:6), the priests answered, ‘*How* have we shown contempt for your name?’ When God explained, ‘You place defiled food on my altar’ (Malachi 1:7), they defended themselves by retorting, ‘*How* have we defiled you?’ When God told the nation, ‘You have wearied the LORD with your words’ (Malachi 2:17), the people responded, ‘*How* have we wearied him?’ In chapter three God declared, ‘Return to me’ (Malachi 3:7) and ‘You rob me’ (Malachi 3:8). They said, ‘*How* are we to return?’ and ‘*How* do we rob you?’ ¶ These statements and retorts reveal six very distinct transgressions, which G. Campbell Morgan calls profanity, sacrilege, greed, weariness in service, honoring of vice, and robbery.” (James Montgomery Boice, *The Minor Prophets*, p. 608)

² “‘What have we spoken against you?’ This was a common expression used in divine judgment speeches (1 Kgs 16:1; 2 Kgs 19:21; 22:19; Ezek 36:5; Amos 3:1), but it was also used to describe arrogant, slanderous, and insulting speech directed either against other people (Pss 31:18; 109:2) or against God.” (Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, NAC, p. 435)

³ Some commentators take this sort of like the rebellious words of a teenager in response to parental criticism which they know is true. Yet that is reading way too much into their response. Throughout this prophecy, the people of God are NOT pictured as their rebellious parents who went into exile on account of their flagrant sin. Recall Jeremiah’s description of the people of his day...

- Jer. 3:3b: “...you have the brazen look of a prostitute; you refuse to blush with shame.”- in OT times, for obvious reasons prostitutes didn’t wear face coverings... and yet amazingly they didn’t blush at all with shame. That’s how far they had fallen in their sin! They were much like what we read in...
- Psalms 12:8: “The wicked strut about on every side, when vileness is exalted among the sons of men.”

...that clearly is not how the people of God are described here. In Malachi, they “held to a form of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5)... they maintained the callings and duties imposed upon them by the Lord... it is that they lost their heart, vigor, and passion for the Lord... which led to six predictable compromises in their living! And so, when God rebuked them for their rebellion, they honestly said, “What are you talking about! We’re doing everything we are supposed to do!”

⁴ “Notice their evaluation of serving the Lord: ‘useless.’ That is a bold and dangerous attitude to have, for the word translated ‘useless’ means ‘vain’ or ‘futile’—something that that is a waste of time. They claim that they gained nothing by serving the Lord, but in reality they weren’t serving Him, they were merely going through the motions out of religious obligation.” (Micah Fries, Stephen Rummage, and Robby Gallaty, *Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, Mal 3:13–15)

⁵ “The term *beṣā* ‘, ‘gain,’ was almost always used with negative connotations of greed, bribery, dishonest gain, or oppression. Although a few neutral uses occur (e.g., Gen 37:26), ‘there are no passages in the OT that use *betsa* ‘ in the sense of a positive striving for gain.’ For example, Isaiah describes Israel’s ‘watchmen’ as ‘these dogs’ who ‘have fierce appetites; they never have enough. And they are shepherds who have no discernment; all of them turn to their own way, every last one for his own gain’ (Isa 56:11; see also 33:15; 57:17; Jer 6:13; 22:17; Ezek 22:12–13). Malachi’s audience was like their tragic ancestors who had liked to listen to Ezekiel’s words, “but they do not put them into practice. With their mouths they express devotion, but their hearts are greedy for unjust gain” (Ezek 33:31).” (Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, NAC, pp. 437-438)

⁶ The language here is covenantal - God’s people believed that they indeed had done their part in earning God’s protection/blessing; the problem is that they believed that God hadn’t held up His part of the bargain!

⁷ “What exactly does it mean when God’s law seems ‘useless,’ a waste of time? How does one even get to that point? It is certainly true that God’s law wasn’t inherently burdensome to His people. In fact, to the Jewish mind the law was good. They loved the law. It lit their steps; it revealed their paths. To the people of Israel, the law was life, similar to what Paul says in Romans 7:22: ‘For in my inner self I joyfully agree with God’s law.’” (Micah Fries, Stephen Rummage, and Robby Gallaty, *Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi*, Mal 3:13–15)

⁸ “The Hebrew verb *qādar* basically means to ‘be dark, to mourn.’ The connection between ‘dark’ and ‘mourn’ may have been the dark or gloomy facial appearance of mourners, or they may have dressed in dark clothing or just smeared ashes on themselves.” (Richard A. Taylor and E. Ray Clendenen, *Haggai, Malachi*, NAC, p. 436)

⁹ “Their complaint was that they had already repented, yet God had not responded. They walked around acting penitent, then they wondered if there was anything in it for them. They adopted a mentality of reciprocity, of deserving something in return for something they had done: ‘We want You to do something for us because of what we have done for You.’” (Micah Fries, Stephen Rummage, and Robby Gallaty, *Exalting Jesus in Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah,*

and Malachi, Mal 3:13–15)

¹⁰ “Opinions differ among commentators as to whether the prophet is dealing here with the ‘righteous’ or the ‘wicked’, assuming that there is always a hard and fast line between them. The attitude described here is one to which God’s servants are particularly prone when times are hard, and they are no longer in the first flush of youthful enthusiasm.” (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, TOTC, pp. 271–272)

¹¹ And so did Asaph! Recall his struggle, “...as for me, my feet came close to stumbling; my steps had almost slipped. For I was envious of the arrogant, as I saw the prosperity of the wicked. For there are no pains in their death; and their body is fat. They are not in trouble as other men; nor are they plagued like mankind. Therefore pride is their necklace; the garment of violence covers them... 13 Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure, and washed my hands in innocence; for I have been stricken all day long, and chastened every morning.” (Psalms 73:2-6, 13-14)

¹² “Those who feared the Lord are not necessarily a different group from those who had been complaining, but they are those who have taken the rebuke, and they begin to encourage each other to renewed faith. It is this groping after faith that the Lord heeded and heard.” (Joyce G. Baldwin, *Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, TOTC, p. 273)

¹³ “Unlike those priests who despised the Lord’s name (1:6), these people ‘valued his name’, glorying in his character. They too talked among themselves, just as the community as a whole did, presumably encouraging one another to remain true to the Lord.” (Iain M. Duguid, *A Study Commentary on Haggai, Zechariah and Malachi*, EPSC, p. 235)