

Malachi 3:13-4:3

Fearing the Lord

Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. 17 And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him – 3:16,17

But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings – 4:2.

The Psalmist exhorts us in Ps. 2:11 to *Serve the LORD with fear, and rejoice with trembling*. David describes this fear in Ps. 19:9 *The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring for ever*; And in Ps. 25:14 we're given a promise: *The secret of the Lord is with those who fear him and he will show them his covenant*.

You might say that the book of Malachi (especially the section that begins with 3:16) illustrates the truth of what the Psalmist says in Ps. 31:19 *Oh how great is thy goodness, which thou hast laid up for them that fear thee; which thou hast wrought for them that trust in thee before the sons of men!*

The Psalmist and the wise author of Proverbs are both in agreement in the truth that the fear of the Lord marks the beginning for the true child of God: Ps. 111:10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: a good understanding have all they that do his commandments: his praise endureth for ever*. Cf. with Prov. 9:10 *The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom: and the knowledge of the holy is understanding*.

The book of Malachi makes it pretty clear that in the beginning of this book you don't find the fear of the Lord. *A son honoureth his father*, the Lord says through the prophet in 1:6 *and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name*. You do find a religious people in the book of Malachi. The historical setting for the book of Malachi is instructive.

It's generally thought that he prophesied during the later time of Nehemiah. If you know the book of Nehemiah then you know that Nehemiah served two terms as Governor in Jerusalem. He came to Jerusalem with the king's permission after setting a time for his return to Persia (2:6). He oversaw the completion of the building of the walls of Jerusalem and then he returned to Persia for a time before coming back to Jerusalem to serve again as Governor a second time.

I don't know how many people realize that when you read the book of Ezra, Ezra gives the history of the initial return of the Jews to the land following their time of exile when Zerubbabel was the Governor of the Jews. The temple is built during that time and when the adversaries of the Jews manage to bring that temple building project to a halt, it's the

ministry of Haggai and Zechariah that encourages them to take up the building project again (Ezra 5:1,2). When you actually come to the first mention of the character, Ezra, you find yourself in Ezra chp. 7 and it's generally believed among commentators that there's about a 60 to 70 year gap between the end of Ezra 6 and the beginning of Ezra 7. I share this history lesson with you only to impress on you that there's a substantial time gap between the times of Haggai and Zechariah with the prophet Malachi. Malachi was not exactly a contemporary with Haggai and Zechariah. I've heard it said that you could have as much as a 100 year gap between them.

So when you come to the book of Malachi, the temple has been built and the city of Jerusalem has been established for quite some time. Nehemiah has returned to be the Governor for his second term. And unfortunately the spiritual condition of the Jews in the land is not very good. In fact it's rather pathetic. Like I said they are going through the motions of their religion. They're offering the prescribed sacrifices albeit half-heartedly.

And in the words we read from Malachi 3 we find what could be taken as a good summary analysis of their true spiritual condition. Look at the words of v. 13. This is the Lord, now, speaking directly to them through the prophet when we read: *Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee?* Do you see their argumentative spirit? This is something you see throughout much of the book of Malachi. The word *stout* in v. 13 indicates a hardness as well as arrogance. One version translates the verse: "*Your words have been arrogant against Me,*" Another version translates it: *Your words have been hard against me.* That pretty much captures their spiritual condition – hard hearted arrogance. And their attitude toward worshiping and serving the Lord is that it's not worth it. It's a waste of time. Listen to the words of 3:14 *Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?*

But when you come to v. 16 in chp. 3 a marked change is noted. *Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another* the section begins. And look at how the Lord Himself responds to their conversations: *the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.* But the Lord doesn't stop there. In the next verse He goes on to say through the prophet: *And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.*

Quite a difference in tone and quite a difference in the content of these verses with all that precedes them in the book of Malachi. And the thing that marks the difference and that creates the contrast is this fear of the Lord. *Then they that feared the Lord spake often one to another* (3:16). *A book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD* – it says later in the verse. This idea of fearing the Lord almost serves as bookends to the verse. And the fact that these "God-fearers" if you will are the ones that enjoy the blessing of the Lord, and are owned by the Lord magnifies all the more the importance of fearing the Lord.

And then you may add to this emphasis the words of 4:2 *But unto you that fear my name shall the Sun of righteousness arise with healing in his wings; and ye shall go forth, and grow up as calves of the stall.* This is what I want to focus on this morning, then – this notion of fearing the Lord. If fearing the Lord is the beginning of knowledge and wisdom and if it is, as the Psalmist says, clean and enduring forever, then it certainly stands to reason that a good way to begin a new year is to begin where the Bible says we need to begin in our knowledge of the Holy. Simply put:

We Must Learn to Fear the Lord

Our call to worship this morning contained an invitation given by God Himself. *Come, ye children, hearken unto me: I will teach you the fear of the LORD* (Ps. 34:11). The blessings of our text this morning are promised to those that fear the Lord. The ones the Lord claims for His own are the ones who fear Him. The ones whose conversations the Lord takes note of and remembers and has a book of remembrance written are those that fear the Lord. So let's hear and heed the Lord's invitation this morning. May the Lord Himself teach us as we hear and heed His word.

The first thing I'd have you see from the text this morning is that:

I. There's a Condition that Must be Overcome

I've touched on this already by calling your attention to what I called a good summary analysis in 3:13. Let me read those words again and then we'll go beyond them to trace this condition that must be overcome. *Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee?* I pointed out the meaning of *stout* – to be hard and arrogant. I also pointed out that they possessed an argumentative spirit.

They were unwilling to listen to the prophet and examine themselves and repent of their sins. Instead they took issue with the prophet's words *What have we spoken so much against thee?* — they wanted to know. And in the next verse the Lord answers them. *Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?*

Now I can't imagine that these were words that they expressed verbally. That wouldn't have been socially acceptable. I think it would be true to say that the Lord answered their thoughts or their heart attitude. We find Jesus doing this on different occasions in the gospels. He knows and answers the thoughts of their hearts. Mt 9:3,4 *And, behold, certain of the scribes said within themselves, This man blasphemeth. And Jesus knowing their thoughts said, Wherefore think ye evil in your hearts?*

So it was in their thoughts or in their hearts that they said *It is vain to serve God. There's no profit in it.* That's a very common attitude, you know, among many Christians today. They view their religion not so much in terms of their service to God as much as God's service to them. And when He doesn't beckon to their every whim and wish or when He

makes them wait, sometimes a long time before He answers their prayers and in the mean time subjects them to painful trials then they reach the place where they conclude that it isn't worth it to serve God. He's not meeting my needs or my heart's desires. I'm only going through the motions of worshiping and serving Him because it's expected of me.

Now I said earlier that this argumentative spirit is found in a number of places throughout the book of Malachi. Let me briefly call your attention to those references. The first is found in the very beginning of the book. Look at 1:2 *I have loved you, saith the LORD*. Now let me pause there to point out what kind and gracious and merciful words are those. Such a word ought to set the believer's heart soaring to the 7th heaven. God through Christ has loved you. God, in spite of what you deserve has loved you and in our case as New Testament believers we know exactly how God has shown that love. Rom. 5:7,8: *For scarcely for a righteous man will one die: yet peradventure for a good man some would even dare to die. 8 But God commendeth his love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.*

Now it's true that in Malachi's day the Jews would not have known this as fully as we know it and yet everything about their heritage told them that God's interest was in them and that they belonged to God. But rather than affirm God's love, they instead doubted it as the rest of 1:2 makes clear: *I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us?* Do you see their doubts and skepticism? They're not altogether different from many Christians today. They doubt the love of God because they only know how to measure that love by worldly circumstances rather than the cross of Christ.

The next reference to their argumentative spirit is found in 1:6 *A son honoureth his father, and a servant his master: if then I be a father, where is mine honour? and if I be a master, where is my fear? saith the LORD of hosts unto you, O priests, that despise my name. And ye say, Wherein have we despised thy name?*

The Lord's answer is very telling and I have to admit that I've found it very challenging and convicting to my own soul. I had thought about devoting an entire message to the Lord's explanation of how they despised His name. Look at what the Lord says to them through the prophet in vv. 7,8: *Ye offer polluted bread upon mine altar; and ye say, Wherein have we polluted thee? In that ye say, The table of the LORD is contemptible. 8 And if ye offer the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? and if ye offer the lame and sick, is it not evil? offer it now unto thy governor; will he be pleased with thee, or accept thy person? saith the LORD of hosts.*

Can you see what's taking place here? When it came to the animal sacrifices that were offered on the altar, the priests (and by implication all the Jews) were offering animals that were blind and sick and lame and good for nothing else but to be offered on the altar. You may recall from the account of the Passover in Exod. 12 that very specific instructions were given that were to be applied to that sacrificial lamb. It was to be spotless and it was to be carefully examined. We know now why that would be the case – that lamb spoke of Christ. But in Malachi's day inferior animals that would have been insulting even to the

earthly governor of the land were being used for worship. And I say I find this challenging and convicting because the analogy can be drawn from this inferior worship to what we offer the Lord in our worship and service today. There's a hymn in our hymnbook that begins like this:

Give of your best to the Master; Give Him first place in your heart; Give Him first place in your service, Fully surrender each part.

Do we do that? Do we give Him the best of our time? Or do we give Him the leftover time which more often than not doesn't even exist? Do we give Him our best when it comes to coming to church and being on time? Or do we have to sadly admit that our preparation and punctuality resembles the same kind of worship the Jews in Malachi's day offered?

I was having this kind of discussion with a brother about a week ago and I brought up Rom. 6:1 *What shall we say then? Shall we continue in sin, that grace may abound?* It's easy to look at that verse and draw easy applications from it. If an adulterer continues as an adulterer after he professes to be saved, isn't he saying *let us continue in sin that grace may abound*. If we continue to use profanity after we profess to be saved are we not saying – it's okay because grace abounds.

Like I say – those are the easy applications of the text. But couldn't the text also apply to those who give the Lord less than their best? Isn't it easy to excuse ourselves from neglected devotions or prayerlessness or carelessness in our worship because we know that God's grace is great and so my weak, pathetic, half-hearted worship and tardiness isn't that big a deal because grace will take care of it – God understands.

Oh how I hope and pray for my own soul and for us all that we'll make a concerted effort to overcome the kind of worship and service that could be analogous to offering blind and lame animals on the altar. The next reference to this argumentative spirit is found in 2:17 *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?* I think this verse brings out the same kind of thing I've just described – grace being abused to justify sin – a little, I suppose, like the church in Corinth who on the basis of grace were failing to discipline a man that was guilty of sin that was heinous even by the Gentile standards.

Then there's 3:8. I'll just read it and leave it to the Spirit of the Lord to apply it. You'll see again the argumentative spirit. *Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings.* And then we come to our text in 3:13. I've already dealt with this verse. I'll read it again though: *Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee?*

When you look at these verses altogether, it becomes pretty easy, doesn't it to recognize a terrible spiritual condition. The Jews in the book of Malachi are carnal and worldly and cynical and half-hearted and negligent. They're doubters and they're faithless and you would have to say pretty much as spiritually blind as the church of Laodicea in the book of

Revelation who are counseled by the Lord to apply for eye salve that they might see their true spiritual condition. This is the backdrop, then, you might say to the book of Malachi. And this backdrop depicts the kind of condition that must be overcome by every child of God. And thankfully the book indicates to us especially beginning in 3:16 that there were those in Malachi's day that did overcome the awful condition that's so graphically portrayed in this book.

And this brings us to our next point – for the words of our text not only reveal a terrible condition to overcome but they also indicate:

II. There's a Spiritual Attitude that Must be Obtained

That attitude is, of course, the very thing we're considering this morning which is an attitude of Godly fear. *Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another.* The word *then* is actually a very important word in this statement because it's pointing to a precise time when the "God-fearers" spoke to each other. In a number of commentaries and in some sermon titles that I looked at without listening to the sermons, it seems that a common mindset among commentators and preachers is that in spite of a general climate of carnal, worldly, and backslidden religion, there was, nevertheless, a remnant of people that did fear the Lord and that tiny remnant is in view here.

Listen to what John Calvin says to refute that interpretation: "In this verse the Prophet tells us that his doctrine had not been without fruit, for the faithful had been stimulated, so that they animated one another, and thus restored each other to a right course. They who explain the words — that the faithful spoke, indefinitely, pervert the meaning of the Prophet, and they also suppress the particle $\alpha\zeta$, az, then. The very subject proves that a certain time is denoted, as though the Prophet had said, that before he addressed the people and vehemently reproved their vices, there was much indifference among them, but that at length the faithful were awakened."

In other words when Malachi prophesied or preached the word that God gave him, that word did become effectual in the lives of a number of Jews. Listen to what Calvin goes on to say: "We are hence taught that we are by nature slothful and tardy, until God as it were plucks our ears; there is therefore need of warnings and stimulants. But let us also learn to attend to what is taught, lest it should become frigid to us." The prophet preached with power and the impact of that power was to generate an attitude of solemn yet awesome and joyful reverence or Godly fear. I think it would be fair to say that revival took place under the prophet's preaching. It may not have been a large scale revival, but on the other hand it may have. There's really no way to tell just how many people fit the description of being God-fearers.

But this much we can say – they become known by their conversation. Christians, especially awakened Christians that truly fear the Lord overcome vain, half-hearted religion and they speak to each other about the things of God. This passage in Malachi brought to my mind a section from Jonathan Edward's Faithful Narrative of the Revival he saw, the Revival that we've come to call the Great Awakening. I know I've shared this

with you before but I can't help but share it again for the way it aptly illustrates what our text is referring to when it says they that feared the Lord spake often one to another.

Presently upon this, a great and earnest concern about the great things of religion and the eternal world, became universal in all parts of the town, and among persons of all degrees, and all ages. The noise amongst the dry bones waxed louder and louder; all other talk but about spiritual and eternal things, was soon thrown by; all the conversation, in all companies and upon all occasions, was upon these things only, unless so much as was necessary for people carrying on their ordinary secular business. Other discourse than of the things of religion would scarcely be tolerated in any company.

The minds of people were wonderfully taken off from the world, it was treated amongst us as a thing of very little consequence. They seemed to follow their worldly business, more as a part of their duty, than from any disposition they had to it; the temptation now seemed to lie on that hand, to neglect worldly affairs too much, and to spend too much time in the immediate exercise of religion. This was exceedingly misrepresented by reports that were spread in distant parts of the land, as though the people here had wholly thrown by all worldly business, and betook themselves entirely to reading and praying, and such like religious exercises. But although people did not ordinarily neglect their worldly business, yet religion was with all sorts the great concern, and the world was a thing only by the bye. The only thing in their view was to get the kingdom of heaven, and every one appeared pressing into it. The engagedness of their hearts in this great concern could not be hid, it appeared in their very countenances. It then was a dreadful thing amongst us to lie out of Christ, in danger every day of dropping into hell; and what persons' minds were intent upon, was to escape for their lives, and to fly from wrath to come.¹

So there was and is conversation about the things of God among those that fear the Lord. There's also another characteristic of those that feared the Lord in our text. Not only were the things of the Lord verbally expressed to others but the text indicates also that there were great thoughts about the Lord in the minds of those that feared Him. *And a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name.*

The people, you see, that fear the Lord think on the Lord. They meditate, in other words. Their minds are filled with the character of God. Thinking upon the Lord's name, you see, means thinking upon His attributes. And so those that think on His name meditate upon His love and grace and mercy and justice and holiness and immutability. And I mention immutability here in particular because one of the most well known verses in the book of Malachi is a verse that references God's immutability. Mal. 3:6 *For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed.*

Oh how I pray that in this new year we've entered we might be characterized as a church that fears the Lord. I would rather have our church characterized that way than any other

¹ Edwards, Jonathan. A Faithful Narrative of the Surprising Work of God: Jonathan Edwards (Kindle Locations 123-127). . Kindle Edition.

way. We don't need to be characterized as a large church, or a small church, or a contemporary church or a traditional church. So long as we're characterized as a God-fearing and Christ-honoring church then we'll also be characterized as a church that is alive.

I had thought to make a third point out of the blessings that are obtained by those that fear the Lord. I'll instead make that point my conclusion. And the thing to note here is that God takes notice of those that fear Him. Our version says *The Lord hearkened and heard it*. Another version reads: *The Lord paid attention and heard it*. Those that fear the Lord, you see, gain His attention and interest and they gain it in a very positive way.

He has a book of remembrance written where those conversations and meditations are concerned. And He owns those who fear His name: *And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels* (v. 17). We sang that hymn that's based on this text earlier in the service. You might get the impression that such a hymn is a children's hymn by the reference it makes to the children being His jewels. It would be a mistake, however, to limit the application to children. It applies to all those that fear His name.

Such is the reward then to those that fear the Lord. The Lord hearkens to them. He hears their prayers. He owns them as His very own and it's to them that the Sun of righteousness arises with healing in His wings (4:2). May this be a year, then, that we as individuals, and as families, and as a church learn all the more to fear the Lord. It will happen as the word read and preached is made effectual to each and every heart.