

October 5

Malachi 1-4

Welcome to the October 5 Project 4:4 reading. Today we read Malachi chapters 1-4, the last of the Minor Prophets and the last book of the Old Testament.

In Nehemiah's book we found Malachi addressing the issues of tithing, Sabbath breaking, intermarriage and unfit priests. These are all relevant issues in the Book of Malachi as well. Malachi writes after Nehemiah's term of office had ended, for he mentions a governor in chapter 1 verse 8 that we read today which almost certainly is not Nehemiah. Writing after Nehemiah, however, the sins to which he alludes are the same ones we met in Nehemiah -- priests who are not faithful, marriages that do not honor God, tithes that are not being brought to the Lord -- the similarities are obvious.

The period in which Malachi brings his prophecy is important to us because it is a time of relative quiet. There is no national emergency facing the people right now. The task of rebuilding the temple and wall is complete. Things are actually going along pretty smoothly in Israel, and that is one of the big problems. Times of peace and relative affluence tend to breed complacency and that is what Malachi (and we too) must face.

The most memorable items in the prophecy of Malachi are found in chapters 3 and 4 but I would like to call your attention to several things we encountered today in chapters 1 and 2. The main theme of these two chapters is the unfaithfulness of the priests and of the people which God rebukes through His prophet. Before the rebuke, there is an opening paragraph in which Malachi affirms God's great love for His people. It starts with the most important thing that Israel (and we) can know. God says: "I have loved you."

As we read through this book of the Bible, it becomes clear that Malachi was an excellent communicator. I am sure of that because of the way in which the Book is structured. It is built around a dialogue. Malachi makes a statement or reports one made by God. Then the obvious question is raised in the minds of his hearers is stated and the prophet responds to the question. That is exactly the way in which the best messages are conducted. The statement is made and then the presenter anticipates the questions that will come to the minds of his hearers. He poses their questions for them and then answers them. Accordingly the way to read this little book is to find the thesis that God is posing, note the question which follows, which will always begin with the words "But you ask ..." and then see the response God's prophet gives to the question.

Thesis No. 1 "'I have loved you,' says the Lord," Question: "But you ask 'How have you loved us?'" What is informing the question is the fact that God has judged Israel and Judah with military defeat and exile from which only Judah has returned so in the minds of some at least, the extent of God's love is open to question. God's answer to the question is a comparison between His dealings with Jacob the father of Israel and Esau and the people he fathered -- Edom. The Jews have come back from exile and

will again prosper, but Edom even if it is rebuilt, will only be crushed again and destroyed. God has loved Israel.

Thesis No. 2 - "Israel's priests have not respected God." Question: "How have we shown contempt for your name?" Answer - The sacrifice of blemished animals, and contemptuous treatment of the Lord's sacrifices.

Thesis No. 3 - "You have wearied the Lord with your words." Question: "How have we wearied Him?" Answer: By questioning the justice of God.

Thesis No. 4 - "You have robbed God." Question: "How do we rob God?" Answer: By not tithing!

Thesis No. 5 - "You have spoken harshly against God." Question: "What did we say?" Answer: You have said it is futile to serve God -- It doesn't do any good!

In dealing with these issues which are just as relevant to our day and age as they were in Malachi's time, the writer of the last Old Testament book gives us some very powerful principles and statements that deserve to be firmly fixed in our minds as we desire to better **Know the Word of God!** Here is my catalog of relevant principles for our day as well as Malachi's.

Principle No. 1 - We dishonor God when we bring offerings that are blemished. The priests and the people were bringing offerings to the temple in Malachi's day. They were doing their duty. But they were bringing animals that were less than perfect. If a lamb had a disease and might not grow to full maturity anyway or had a market value that was diminished because of its imperfection, these people brought it for sacrifice instead of the costlier perfect animal. God wasn't pleased at that.

You and I are not required to bring animals for sacrifice, but I am sure much more often than we would like to admit, the sacrifices we do bring are less than the best we could bring. If the governor would not be pleased with a second rate offering, how do you think God feels when you offer that which is second rate to Him??

Principle No. 2 - Marriage is very important to God. To profane it by marrying someone who does not honor God or by breaking your marriage vows in divorce is detestable to Him. Many of you were already familiar with what the Book of Malachi has to contribute to the Christian view of marriage and divorce. God's attitude is stated here more bluntly than anywhere else in scripture. God hates divorce. That is as succinct a statement as you will ever find on the subject.

Now once again, because those words will cut deeply into the hearts of many of you, I need to remind you that God's grace is greater than any sin we ever have or ever will commit. God hates every sin but He also will forgive any sin which is confessed and brought to the foot of Christ's cross. Divorce is not the unpardonable sin and there most certainly is forgiveness and life after divorce. Nevertheless be very sure of this, God hates it. There can be no compromise on that issue.

Never marry an unbeliever -- if you do, you have violated a strict principle of God's Word, and never forget if you are a Christian you must be irrevocably committed to your marriage and spouse. For you there is no exit door marked "Divorce -- irreconcilable differences." Malachi's closing words in this section of his book are important: "So guard yourself in your spirit and do not break faith."

Principle No. 3 - Justice will be done. Never question God. Malachi's hearers like believers in every age, were easily tempted to look around and see that the wicked were doing very nicely and seemed not to have any reason to be concerned about a holy God. "Isn't God ever going to judge them?" was their thought. Malachi answers that objection with a promise, at the beginning of chapter 3, that God will judge, that justice will be done, that "Malachi" -- my messenger will prepare the way for the Lord who will suddenly come to His temple. That prophecy sounds very Messianic and it was a prophecy regarding the coming Christ.

Christ will return. We know that. And when He returns He will judge the earth and execute absolute justice. Until then we need to leave the keeping of accounts and distributing of judgment entirely to Him.

Principle No. 4 - If we will fulfill our obligation to tithe, God will honor His promise to bless. I honestly do not understand how anyone who has read the third chapter of the Book of Malachi can possibly conclude that they are not obligated to give back a portion of their income to the Lord. The language here -- as in the matter of divorce, is very blunt and plain. If you do not tithe are you "robbing God?" It is a plain and simple obligation that we have. But, it is also a self-serving, beneficial obligation, for if we honor God, He promises to "throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out a blessing upon us that we will not have room to contain." From a purely selfish point of view, I do not know how anyone could refuse to tithe. The sad reality is that most do!! If we fulfill our obligation to tithe, God will honor His promise to bless.

Have you been challenged by today's reading in Malachi? Since God is worthy of our worship, do we give Him our best? When we obey God's commands, we are blessed. When we disobey we suffer. Are there commands you are discarding regarding marriage and tithing? Are you allowing circumstances to affect your view of God's love for you? Remember that God's people are His most treasured possession and live in light of that today.