

This morning is the third Sunday in Advent, the season that leads us right up to Christmas, and I am in the third week of my sermon series through the book of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament. Malachi is a prophetic book by genre, which means that as the people of Israel were falling away from faithfulness to God, that God raised up Malachi as a prophet, to be God's mouthpiece, to confront the people with their sins and call them to repent, to turn back to faithfulness to God. That means that you are going to find that this book, like most prophetic books, is very direct and confrontational in its style. It is meant to make those whose lives are not lining up with God's design very uncomfortable when they hear it. I believe that if you are willing to listen to what God has to say through Malachi, that you will be challenged as well.

In chapter 1, God's main message through his spokesperson Malachi is that His people are not honoring God, but are giving Him their leftovers, their scraps. They do not take his holiness seriously, nor do they take their sins seriously. Instead, they are bringing offerings to God that are not the best, not what God has required of them. In chapter 2, God gives Malachi a harsh word for the spiritual leaders in their community, and then confronts men who are divorcing their wives and marrying women who serve foreign gods. I would encourage you to listen to those sermons if you missed them.

This morning we will be in chapter 2, verse 17 through chapter 3, verse 12. This passage has a lot to say about justice, money, and the Messiah.

***Malachi 2:17** - You have wearied the LORD with your words. "How have we wearied him?" you ask. By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with them" or "Where is the God of justice?"*

The book of Malachi is organized around a series of disputes, where God makes an assertion or accusation, the people question Him, and then God answers their question. In this verse, God tells them that they are making Him weary. And when they ask why, the answer is that they have been complaining about the injustice they see, that the wicked seem to be prospering, while the Israelites seem to be suffering. **"Where is the God of justice?"** they ask.

Their issue with God is that although He claims to be their God, it seems like those who do evil are not being punished but are getting away with it, while God's people are suffering. And so, they accuse God of either being unjust or absent. Maybe you can relate to this question. God, why do you allow such injustice in our

lives and in this world? Why do the wicked seem to prosper while the righteous suffer? Where is the God of justice?

In order to answer this question, we first need to understand what justice is, Biblically speaking. Then we can address their question of where the God of justice is, and understand how we are to respond to this God of justice.

Justice is central to what it means to follow God. Consider Micah 6:8: *He has showed you, O man, what is good. And what does the LORD require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God.*

The Hebrew word for justice is Mishpat, and the word for mercy is chesedh, which is God's unconditional grace and compassion. In Micah 6:8, God tells His people that He wants them to do acts of justice motivated by merciful love.

The most basic meaning of justice, or mishpat, is to treat people equitably, giving them their rights or due without partiality, regardless of race, ethnicity, gender, etc. It has a **communal or relational element**, associated with the Hebrew word Tsedekah, usually translated as righteousness. Righteousness is right relationships between people and God and people with each other. To act justly is to treat every person as someone made in the image of God, with the God-given dignity they deserve. Justice, or mishpat, also has a **restorative element** – seeking out vulnerable people who are being taken advantage of, particularly widows, orphans, immigrants, and the poor, and helping them. Finally, it also has a **punitive element**: bringing a murderer to justice means to give him the consequences that he deserves. There is justice in a society when people are in right relationship with God and with each other as people created in God's image, when evildoers are punished and the vulnerable are helped. Listen to these passages:

***Jeremiah 22:3*** - *This is what the LORD says: Do what is just and right. Rescue from the hand of his oppressor the one who has been robbed. Do no wrong or violence to the alien, the fatherless or the widow, and do not shed innocent blood in this place.*

***Psalms 146:7-9*** - *He upholds the cause of the oppressed and gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets prisoners free, <sup>8</sup> the LORD gives sight to the blind, the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down, the LORD loves the righteous. <sup>9</sup> The LORD watches over the alien and sustains the fatherless and the widow, but he frustrates the ways of the wicked.*

Notice how God identifies over and over with the poor and oppressed, which is a revolutionary thing in those days, when people typically associated their gods with the king. **A just world is one where people are living according to God's moral will and standards and loving their neighbor as themselves.** But the Israelites are accusing God of not living according to His character.

Now, I have to be very careful with the words I use, because **there is a different conception of justice, and especially social justice, being used in our culture today.** You see, when people conclude that there is no God of justice, then they begin to create their own conceptions of justice. As Scott David Allen defines it, social justice is *“deconstructing traditional systems and structures deemed to be oppressive, and redistributing power and resources from oppressors to their victims in the pursuit of equality of outcome.”* This is a definition that comes from a worldview known as critical theory, and is fixated on issues such as power, privilege, oppression, and victimization. This worldview divides people into different group identities – white and non-white, gay and straight, male and female, transgender and cisgender, able-bodied and disabled – and calls the group with power – that is, the white, patriarchal, heterosexual, male hegemony - the oppressor, in that they impose their ideology on everyone else. The other group is the oppressed. This is a movement seeking equality of outcome, the liberation of oppressed groups from the domination of oppressor groups, so that there would be equality, no power differential in the world. And as we are going to find as we look at Malachi 3, while there are some similarities between this view and the Biblical view, there are also many differences that are important to reject. I am only going to touch on this subject this morning; if you want a more full treatment, a couple of books are Allen's *Why social justice is not Biblical justice*, Thaddeus Williams' *Confronting injustice without compromising truth*, or, if you would prefer to read or watch something online, check out Neil Shenvi.

So, if that is justice, how does God answer them? Where is the God of justice?

*<sup>NIV</sup> Malachi 3:1 "See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the LORD Almighty. <sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, <sup>4</sup> and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be **acceptable to the LORD**, as in days gone by, as in former years. <sup>5</sup> "So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify*

*against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty.*

Remember, the people are accusing God of being unjust, or absent, allowing evildoers to prosper and not coming to the aid of the righteous. So, what is His response? **I am coming**. There will be a messenger who will go first to prepare the way, and then the Lord Himself will come to the temple. So where is the God of justice? He's coming soon. **Great news, right? Not so fast:**

*<sup>2</sup> But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. <sup>3</sup> He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver.*

The people are accusing God of being either unjust or absent. And God says that He will show up. And an interesting thing is going to happen. When God appears, HE will not be on trial. THEY will be on trial. Malachi says, who will be able to stand when He appears? He will be like fire, like a refiner's fire, come to separate the dross, the slag from the silver. He will be like a launderer's soap, come to separate the dirt and mud from the skin.

What do we learn about justice from Malachi 3?

- 1) **No one is righteous before Him.**

None are right with God. No one can stand in judgment on God. None can stand when He appears. When God shows up, people fall down.

***Isaiah 6:1-5** - In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a throne, high and exalted, and the train of his robe filled the temple. <sup>2</sup> Above him were seraphs, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. <sup>3</sup> And they were calling to one another: "Holy, holy, holy is the LORD Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory." <sup>4</sup> At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke. <sup>5</sup> "Woe to me!" I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."*

**Acts 9:1-4** - *Meanwhile, Saul was still breathing out murderous threats against the Lord's disciples. He went to the high priest <sup>2</sup> and asked him for letters to the synagogues in Damascus, so that if he found any there who belonged to the Way, whether men or women, he might take them as prisoners to Jerusalem. <sup>3</sup> As he neared Damascus on his journey, suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. <sup>4</sup> He fell to the ground and heard a voice say to him, "Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?"*

**Revelation 1:12-18** - *I turned around to see the voice that was speaking to me. And when I turned I saw seven golden lampstands, <sup>13</sup> and among the lampstands was someone "like a son of man," dressed in a robe reaching down to his feet and with a golden sash around his chest. <sup>14</sup> His head and hair were white like wool, as white as snow, and his eyes were like blazing fire. <sup>15</sup> His feet were like bronze glowing in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of rushing waters. <sup>16</sup> In his right hand he held seven stars, and out of his mouth came a sharp double-edged sword. His face was like the sun shining in all its brilliance. <sup>17</sup> When I saw him, I fell at his feet as though dead. Then he placed his right hand on me and said: "Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last. <sup>18</sup> I am the Living One; I was dead, and behold I am alive for ever and ever! And I hold the keys of death and Hades.*

**Job 42:5-6** - *My ears had heard of you but now my eyes have seen you. <sup>6</sup> Therefore I despise myself and repent in dust and ashes."*

When God shows up, we are not going to be putting Him on trial. There will be no debate. We will be the ones under examination. If there are no righteous, then the first answer to "Where is the God of justice? Why do the righteous suffer?" is that there are no righteous!

**Romans 3:22-23** - *There is no difference, <sup>23</sup> for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,*

The Israelites in Malachi's day were mistaken. We can not separate people into good and bad, righteous and wicked. As Aleksandr Solzhenitsyn put it, "*The line separating good and evil passes not through states, nor between classes, nor between political parties either -- but right through every human heart -- and through all human hearts.*"

Or, as British author and Christian G. K. Chesterton reportedly said when a newspaper in London sent out an inquiry to famous authors, asking the question, "What's wrong with the world today?", "Dear Sir, I am. Yours, G.K. Chesterton."

Any understanding of justice begins here, with the understanding that before a holy God, all are unrighteous. None are good. No one holds the moral high ground. Do you understand this? Do you get that justice starts here?

2) Justice is not just about oppression but is also about God's standard of holiness

<sup>5</sup> *"So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me," says the LORD Almighty*

God hates when those who have power oppress the vulnerable. But God's justice also involves standards of purity and holiness.

This is contrary to the modern conception of justice, which focuses exclusively on oppression. In the modern-day version of justice, white people are racist simply by virtue of being white, regardless of whether or not they have personally done anything. And on the flip side, there is a moral superiority inherent in being part of the oppressed group, even if they are not living according to God's holy standards. According to modern day social justice theory, it is irrelevant whether or not an individual's life lines up with God's standard of holiness. All that matters is the group you belong to. This is not Biblical justice.

The Bible cuts through the modern conception of social justice and declares that all are guilty. The world is not divided into oppressed and oppressors. Sin is not just oppression, but moral transgression as well, offense against a holy God. All alike are guilty and in need of salvation. No one is morally superior to anyone else.

3) Living a just life begins with repentance and faith in Jesus

<sup>6</sup> *"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.*  
<sup>7</sup> *Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.*

In verse 6, God tells them that they will not be destroyed. But if no one is righteous, then how will they endure the day of his coming? How can they stand when He appears? If they are so sinful, how is it that His fire will not destroy

them? And how will the fire of God's holiness not destroy you? Go back to verse 1:

*"See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come"*

450 years after Malachi, a messenger came, John the Baptist, just as God told them in Malachi's prophecy, to prepare the way for the Lord Himself to come. And then Jesus, the eternal Son of God, came to His people. But the God of justice came not to give us what we deserved for our sins, but to take the justice we deserved onto Himself. At the cross, God's justice and mercy met, as the perfect Son of God received the righteous wrath of God on sin and evil and offered forgiveness to the world. Where is the God of justice? Why won't He put an end to evil? Because the line between good and evil runs through every human heart, and if He were to put an end to evil, He would be putting an end to all of us. And so, God send His Son to die in our place, and to give us a new heart.

**2 Corinthians 5:17-21** - *Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!* <sup>18</sup> *All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation:* <sup>19</sup> *that God was reconciling the world to himself in Christ, not counting men's sins against them. And he has committed to us the message of reconciliation.* <sup>20</sup> *We are therefore Christ's ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ's behalf: Be reconciled to God.* <sup>21</sup> *God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.*

*Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty.*

Repent. Return to me. Then the fire of God's holiness will not destroy you but will refine you into the person you were meant to be. This is what the Bible calls sanctification – God purifying us from the evil within and making us more like Him. Remember the image of the refiner's fire?

*"There is a dramatic moment when the refiner knows that all dross has gone from the silver. Peering over it, the silver suddenly becomes a liquid mirror in which the image of the refiner is reflected. Then he knows that his task is done."*

Like a refiner, God will refine you until He sees His image in you.

God is not on trial; you are. Is Jesus your advocate? Repent of your sin and return to Him this morning. God is quick to forgive and embrace all who repent.

In verses 7-12, God goes on to specifically tell them how they are to return to Him.

*"But you ask, 'How are we to return?' <sup>8</sup> 'Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. 'But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' 'In tithes and offerings. <sup>9</sup> You are under a curse-- the whole nation of you-- because you are robbing me. <sup>10</sup> Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. <sup>11</sup> I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. <sup>12</sup> "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.*

God tells them to be generous, to bring the whole tithe into the storehouse. Why does generosity matter so much to God?

### 1) Not being generous robs others by contributing to injustice and oppression

God tells them that they are robbing him by not bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse. In the Old Testament, the tithe was the first fruits, 10% of your income, your crops, etc. that was meant to be brought into the storehouse to be used for ministry and charity. It supported the priests and those who worked in the temple, and it allowed the spiritual leaders to care for the poor, the widows, the orphans, the aliens. And offerings were gifts on top of the tithes, given by the people for the priests or for other special purposes.

In verse 8, God uses a strong word, translated here as “rob,” but carrying the sense of to oppress, spoil, or pillage. It is the word used for invading a town and violently ransacking it. As you can imagine, they are wondering, how are we doing that? How are we pillaging or oppressing you, God?

Go back to the concept of justice and righteousness. Remember that God’s design is for a world of justice and righteousness, where people are in right relationship with Him and with each other, and where those who have an advantage help those who are disadvantaged. And the means by which that was done in Malachi’s day was through the tithe. Therefore, by withholding the tithe for themselves, they are creating a community of injustice and unrighteousness. They are robbing God, pillaging the community through their injustice. And so, God tells them to bring

the whole tithe into the storehouse, to be generous so that they might bring justice to their community.

*The righteous are willing to disadvantage themselves to advantage the community; the wicked are willing to disadvantage the community to advantage themselves –*  
Bruce Waltke

## 2) Not being generous robs God by acting like an owner instead of a steward

The Bible teaches us that everything we have is a gift from the Lord. All that we have is not ours to own, but is God's. Even our abilities, opportunities, and circumstances are a gift. You may think that you earned what you have through your own hard work, but the reality is that if you had been born in a slum in Africa, you would not be as successful as you are today. You are where you are by God's grace.

The Bible also teaches us that we are the stewards of God's household. We are like God's money managers, and it's God's money, God's possessions, God's time. Think about it. If you are a money manager, then you must invest in line with the values of the investors, or you have committed fraud. And if he has given you more than you need, but you don't share with those who are in need, then you are robbing God. You are defrauding your investor. You are plundering and pillaging God's creation.

For those of us who have a hard time giving money away, it is critical that we make this shift in our thinking. Giving 10% of your income away seems so hard. But what if you saw it as a wealthy person giving you money and asking you to return 10% but allowing you to do as you please with the remaining 90%?

Consider what John Wesley said: *Not, how much of my money will I give to God, but how much of God's money will I keep for myself*

There is so much more we and other ministries want to be able to do in this world as a church, but we need you to bring your whole tithe to God.

## 3) Not being generous robs us of the blessing of God's generosity and freedom

<sup>10</sup> *Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room*

enough for it. <sup>11</sup> I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. <sup>12</sup> "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

In this passage, God promises that He will bless them when they test Him in their generosity. Now, I want to be very careful with this passage. **The promises in this passage are in line with the old covenant, where the rewards for obedience were very earthly – prosperity, good crops, peace, long life, and so on. In the New Testament, under the new covenant, the rewards are sometimes received in this world, but are always received in eternity.** And so, I want to warn you that anyone who preaches this passage promising that if you give to God, that He will give you back a lot of money is either misinterpreting this passage or outright lying to you in order to take your money.

Tithing is an Old Testament principle. It was the 10% given to the temple to provide for the priests and care for the poor and those in need. The New Testament does not teach the tithe; instead, it focuses on generosity, because the new covenant is not about laws but about grace and whole-hearted obedience to God. Nevertheless, I would encourage you not to see freedom from the law as freedom to be selfish and stingy and give less. Instead, a true understanding of God's generosity and grace towards you should lead you to recognize that all you have is His, and to give even more than the tithe. After all, when do you ever see the demands become less in the new covenant?

**2 Corinthians 9:6-8** - Remember this: *Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously.* <sup>7</sup> *Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.* <sup>8</sup> *And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.*

God is generous. He will give you everything you need as you live a life of generosity. If you are a trustworthy steward, then He will trust you with more for the work of His kingdom. **It is worth asking yourself if you can give more of what you have away and live on less.**

God is faithful. And as you honor Him with your money, and with your tithes and offering, God will bless you. You will experience the peace, the freedom from

anxiety that comes from knowing that as you seek Him first and put Him first, that He takes care of your needs, like Jesus promised in Matthew 6.

Return to God and put your faith in Jesus and be generous, as He has been generous with you. Because your money and possessions are not yours. Because you will experience the blessing of God's generosity and freedom when you are generous with others. And because you will be contributing to creating a world of justice and righteousness.

Where is the God of justice? On the cross. And at the right hand of the Father. And one day He will return again to set everything right. Return to Him and live a life of generosity and justice, just as He has been generous with you.