

International Sunday School Lesson
Study Notes
August 30, 2015

Lesson Text: Malachi 3:1-10
Lesson Title: Return to a Just God

Introduction

The prophet Malachi, whose name means “honoring God,” prophesied about 100 years after Haggai and Zechariah. He was the last of the Old Testament prophets, and thus the final voice of God until the silence was broken when God spoke to Zacharias announcing the birth of John the Baptist (Luke 1). Little is known about the prophet Malachi but it is clear he was a man of great courage. He preached powerful sermons on some very sensitive subjects.

Malachi prophesied several decades after the temple was rebuilt. He spoke to a people that had a restored religious system and an outward appearance of being right with God. They brought their sacrifices and offerings to the temple, but kept the best for themselves (Malachi 1:7-8). They were a religious people whose spirituality was superficial and hypocritical. Not only had they become indifferent and bitter toward God, they had lost significance in the eyes of their neighbors.

Malachi’s message contains timely truths for the twenty-first century. For people who are not committed to Christ and His church, Malachi offers a solution. He calls on men to “return” to the Lord. “Return” is Malachi’s word for repentance. This was a challenge for the people of Israel in Malachi’s day and an even greater challenge for Christians today. People are bored with worship and growing less committed to Christ. To the extent that we have failed in our relationships with each other and with Christ, we need to hear and heed Malachi’s call to “return to God.”

God’s Promise to His People (Malachi 3:1-4)

When God’s people returned to their homeland from Babylonian captivity, they expected to experience prosperity and glory, as in the days of Solomon. But that was not the case. The wicked nations around them prospered while Judah suffered. That caused God’s people to question God and ask, “*Where is the God of judgment?*” (Malachi 2:17). Malachi’s response indicated that God was sick of hearing the prosperity of the wicked and suffering of the righteous argument. It was time for the people to face their guilt and sin and return to the Lord.

Verse 1

“Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me: and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to his temple, even the messenger of the covenant, whom ye delight in: behold, he shall come, saith the LORD of hosts.”

First, God’s promise of intervention is in the words, “Behold, I will send my messenger...” This promised “messenger” is none other than John the Baptist (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27). In response to the people’s question, “*Where is the God of judgment?*” (Malachi 2:17), God presented an overview of the coming of His Messiah and all that His coming involves. God will make things right when Messiah comes, but before Messiah comes, God’s “messenger,” John the Baptist will come to prepare the way.

The “messenger” would be one who “shall prepare the way” for the coming Messiah. Without question, that was John the Baptist (Isaiah 40:3). Neither the priests nor the people were prepared for Messiah to come. John’s task was to preach repentance and clear the way for the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ. In biblical times, it was customary to send men ahead when a king or dignitary was coming to a city. Those men, called “forerunners,” would “prepare the way” by removing obstacles in the roadway, filling in potholes, and making the road as smooth as possible. The fact that John the Baptist was sent to “prepare the way” for Messiah’s coming, proved the people were spiritually unprepared. Likewise, most people today are not ready for Christ’s second coming (Matthew 7:23).

“The Lord...the messenger of the covenant” is a reference to Jesus Christ (Jeremiah 31:31-34; Hebrews 12:24). Jesus coming “suddenly to his temple” will fulfill the Old Covenant and institute the New Covenant. Malachi’s purpose for mentioning this specific prophecy was probably because the people were complaining that the Messianic promises of Haggai and Zechariah had not yet been fulfilled. Malachi wants the people to understand the Messianic promises will be fulfilled “suddenly,” and they are not spiritually ready.

Note: Many today profess they are saved and ready for the Lord’s return, but they really do not want Him to return until they are finished living the life they want to live.

Verse 2-3

“But who may abide the day of his coming? and who shall stand when he appeareth? for he is like a refiner's fire, and like fullers' soap: And he shall sit as a refiner and purifier of silver: and he shall purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer unto the LORD an offering in righteousness.”

Second, God's purpose of intervention is to "refine" and "purify" the people. Malachi asks two rhetorical questions: "Who may abide the day of his coming? And who shall stand when he appeareth?" These two questions combine aspects of both the First and Second Comings, but ultimately refers to the Second Coming of Christ, when He will judge the nations and Israel. The question is, "Who will be able to withstand His judgment when He appears?" The answer is, "No unrighteous person!"

The second "messenger" will come with purifying judgment. He will be "like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap." A "refiner's fire" is used to purge dross from metal. A "refiner" sits over a pot of molten metal and controls the heat of the fire during the refining process. By "sitting," the refiner shows his careful work and concern over the process. He strains or filters out the dross and impurities until the metal is pure. Tradition says the "refiner" knows the metal is pure when he can see the reflection of his own face in the liquid.

The "fuller" was a laundryman. He would take his "soap," mix it with water, and scrub a garment on a hard surface until the garment was clean. God's people were so steeped in sin before their 70 years of captivity that just returning home did not remove the stain. God's purpose in "purifying the sons of Levi" was to make them fit for service so they could "offer unto the LORD as offering in righteousness."

Both the "refiner's fire" and "fuller's soap" represent serious and painful intervention to remove sin and make pure. They also remind us that there is potential in the process to bring the valuable to the surface. What an encouragement it is to know God doesn't abandon impure people like us! The Lord could have come like a forest fire and consumed us in His wrath. Through grace He comes as a "refiner's fire" and brings the best out of us. That is grace! God's ultimate answer for corruption, sin, and impurity was the first coming of Messiah and will be the Second Coming of Christ.

Verse 4

"Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD, as in the days of old, and as in former years."

"Then" means after Messiah comes and the refining and purifying takes place. Only "then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD..." "Pleasant" means "acceptable." By Malachi's time, the sacrificial system and offerings has been a part of Israel's worship for thousands of years. That system had been defiled and its meaning had been lost in apathy and hypocrisy. After Messiah comes the "offering of Judah and Jerusalem" will once again be acceptable to the Lord "as in the days of old, and as in the former years." Most likely "the days of old" and "former years" is a reference to the

offerings and sacrifices in Moses' day and the days of the United Kingdom under David and Solomon.

God's Punishment of His People (Malachi 3:5)

Verse 5

“And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, and against the adulterers, and against false swearers, and against those that oppress the hireling in his wages, the widow, and the fatherless, and that turn aside the stranger from his right, and fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts.”

Malachi continues to answer the people's question in Malachi 2:17, “*Where is the God of judgment.*” In order to further answer their question, Malachi takes the people into God's courtroom. God's courtroom is different from mans. God is both *judge* and *witness*.

“And I will come near to you in judgment; and I will be a swift witness...” is Messiah speaking. God is surely coming with justice and when He does it will be swift and sure. His justice will target four specific activities in the life of His people.

1) God will judge Sorcery-The word “sorcerers” means “to whisper a spell.” It refers to witchcraft. The Old Testament affirms there is an objective reality behind the black arts (Exodus 7:11-12). The Old Testament law called for death for those who practiced sorcery (Exodus 22:18; Leviticus 20:27). Occultism is wide spread in the United States and many nations around the world. Sorcery takes many forms such as casting spells, omens, mediums, and palm readers. False prophets often use sorcery disguised as light to communicate their message of health and prosperity (2 Corinthians 11:14). “Sorcery” is clearly linked to the misuse and abuse of drugs, which is rampant in our society. Those who practice “sorcery” will have their part in the second death and will never enter the gates of heaven (Revelation 21:8; 22:15).

2) God will judge Adultery-The word “adulterers” refers to those who engage in premarital and extramarital sex. Adultery is also committed by those who unbiblically divorce or enter into a second marriage while their first spouse is still living (Matthew 5:32). Although society and the church at large ignores “adultery,” the seventh commandment prohibits it (Exodus 20:14). The Hebrew writer said, “*Marriage is honourable in all, and the bed undefiled: but whoremongers and adulterers God will judge*” (Hebrews 13:4).

3) God will judge False Swearers-A “false swearer” is someone who committed perjury in a court of law. Those who did so in Israel were condemned under the

Law (Exodus 20:7; Leviticus 19:12). Perjury is at an all-time high today. Men will lie under oath to save their jobs and positions in life. Lying has become an acceptable way of life. Liars will never see God's heaven (Revelation 21:8).

4) God will judge those who Defraud Others-To "oppress the hireling" means "to cheat the employee out of his pay." Such practices were condemned by Old Testament Law (Leviticus 19:13; Deuteronomy 24:15) as well as the New Testament as well (Luke 10:7; 1 Timothy 5:18). Three other groups are mentioned as being oppressed: "the widow, the fatherless, and the stranger." In most cases, these three groups of people are unable to defend themselves and are preyed upon by those who can profit from their plight. Those who take advantage of the helpless and weak "fear not me, saith the LORD of hosts."

Israel's oppression of the helpless was clear evidence they did not "fear" the Lord. The same is true of us when we willfully mistreat the helpless for our own profit (Proverbs 15:3).

God's Problem with His People (Malachi 3:6-9)

Verse 6

"For I am the LORD, I change not; therefore ye sons of Jacob are not consumed."

The assurance of divine justice and mercy is rooted in the immutability of God. "For I am the LORD, I change not..." God is not subject to change through time or circumstances. Even when Israel had violated their covenant with God (Malachi 2:10), God had not violated His covenant with Israel (Psalm 89:34).

Malachi called Israel "sons of Jacob," to remind them of their covenant relationship with the Lord. Although God may punish and chasten the children of Israel, they will not be "consumed." The same is true for New Testament believers. Even when we fail, the Lord is faithful (2 Timothy 2:13).

Verse 7

"Even from the days of your fathers ye are gone away from mine ordinances, and have not kept them. Return unto me, and I will return unto you, saith the LORD of hosts. But ye said, Wherein shall we return?"

Before Malachi addresses the main problem of robbing God, He lays before the people a charge of rebellion against God. The words "even from the days of your fathers" means this problem of "going away from mine ordinances" or their disobedience had not started yesterday or even before the Babylonian captivity. It was a long-standing problem (Isaiah 43:27; Ezra 2:3).

Even in their disobedience and rebellion, God extended a gracious invitation. He said, "Return unto me, and I will return unto you..." God promised to meet their repentance with His blessing. But that would only happen if they truly repented of their sin and came back to the Lord.

You would think the people would have shouted, "Thank you Lord." Instead, they responded hypocritically, "Wherein shall we return?" Their verbal response carries a tone of self-righteousness. They seem to be saying, "Return, we have gone anywhere!"

Note: Many professing Christians today respond in the same way when confronted with their sin. Sin has so lulled people into a spiritual apathy and indifference that they are unable to discern where they really stand with the Lord.

Verse 8

"Will a man rob God? Yet ye have robbed me. But ye say, Wherein have we robbed thee? In tithes and offerings."

After responding to God with their self-righteous question, "Wherein shall we return," it is obvious the people are so blind they cannot see their spiritual condition. Therefore, God will declare one particular sin with a blunt question: "Will a man rob God?" The Hebrew word for "rob" is *qaba* {kaw-bah} and is only used here and in Proverbs 22:23. It means "to defraud, to take forcibly."

The question "Will a man rob God" seems unbelievable. Would any person presume to "rob God?" Then without waiting for an answer from the people, God said, "Yet ye have robbed me." These words indicate they were robbing God while He was speaking. It was an on-going sin.

How can humans "rob God?" They were robbing God "in tithes and offerings." The "tithes and offerings" belonged to God, and failure to give God what belonged to Him meant they were defrauding God. From Mount Sinai God had said all the tithe of the land belonged to Him and declared "...it is holy unto the LORD" (Leviticus 27:30).

The word "tithe" means "a tenth part." A "tithe" for the Israelite was 10 percent of their grain, fruits, animals, or money (Nehemiah 13:5). "Offerings" were the portions of sacrifices set apart for the priests and voluntary gifts for special occasions (Exodus 25:2-7; 29:27-28; Leviticus 7:32).

Note: Commenting on tithing, Walter Kaiser writes, "Christians are not governed by any law that commands us to give a tenth of our earnings to God; however, it must be noted that the practice of tithing precedes any provision of the Law of Moses (see Abram's response in Genesis 14:20 and Jacob's vow at Bethel in

Genesis 28:22). Another argument often made in favor of Christians tithing is: "If it was appropriate under the law to give a tenth, Christians will want to give no less than a tenth insofar as we have received and known so much more!" How could it be put any more succinctly? No one robs God without robbing himself at the same time!

Verse 9

"Ye are cursed with a curse: for ye have robbed me, even this whole nation."

The language of this verse states that the whole nation was guilty before God in this religious plot to rob Him (Malachi 1:14; 2:2). Therefore, they were "cursed with a curse." The details of this "curse" are not given in this verse, only the fact of it. This "curse" is best described in Proverbs 11:24, *"There is that scattereth, and yet increaseth; and there is that withholdeth more than is meet, but it tendeth to poverty."* If you "rob God" you will eventually be in want. That is a curse within itself.

God said, "For ye have robbed me." The people of Israel were robbing God personally because the sin of not tithing and giving their offerings was against the person of God. They were robbing God by offering corrupt sacrifices (Malachi 1:8); breaking their marital vows they had promised God (Malachi 2:10); and defrauding the helpless (Malachi 3:5).

God's Program for His People (Malachi 3:10)

Verse 10

"Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house, and prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts, if I will not open you the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it."

Even while the indicting words of the Lord were ringing in their ears, God gave them a plan for blessing and spiritual renewal. "Bring ye all the tithes into the storehouse, that there may be meat in mine house..." "All the tithes" is a mathematical phrase meaning "the whole or the entire tithe." God did not want just 10 percent of their possessions. He wanted "all the tithes" or the "whole." That meant if their heart was not in it, it was not acceptable.

The "storehouse" was the chamber in the Temple where the "tithes and offerings" were kept. This chamber was a place of safe keeping for the grain, produce, and money the people brought to the Lord in obedience to His Law. In this context the word "storehouse" does not refer to the local church, for the church was not in existence during this time. The principles for Christian giving are clearly defined in the Pauline epistles. *"Upon the first day of the week*

let every one of you lay by him in store, as God hath prospered him, that there be no gatherings when I come" (1 Corinthians 16:2; 2 Corinthians 8:2, 7-9, 12, 19-20; 9:5-12). According to the Scriptures, giving must come from a willing heart and on the basis of grace, not Law. That is God's program for this day of grace. How could anyone saved by grace give less to the Lord than someone under the Law?

God promised Israel if they brought their "tithes and offerings to the storehouse," there would be "meat in mine house." Under the old covenant, tithes and offerings go to the Levites to provide for their needs as they ministered to in the Temple (Numbers 18; Nehemiah 10:36-39). Today, the offerings of God's people maintain church facilities, provided for the pastor and church staff, and provide funds for fulfilling the Great Commission and taking care of local and world-wide needs (1 Corinthians 9:14; 2 Corinthians 8:1-15; 1 Timothy 5:17).

"Prove me now herewith, saith the LORD of hosts..." is an invitation from the Lord for the people to test and see that God is the only righteous God who rewards obedience. "If I will not open the windows of heaven, and pour you out a blessing, that there shall not be room enough to receive it" literally means the Lord will "open the flood gates of heaven." The word "windows" here in this verse is the same word "windows" in Genesis 7:11, when the great flood waters gushed upon the earth. God is promising to pour a continuous supply of blessings like flood rains from heaven!

Giving from a willing heart is an act of faith. Believers do not give in order to receive a return on our investment. Giving to the Lord is not a pyramid scheme or using God for a financial investment. If you give because of a selfish expectation of financial return, you lose temporarily and eternally. In other words, if you give because it pays, it will not pay!

Conclusion

While New Testament believers cannot personally claim God's promise to His covenant people in Malachi 3:10, we do have a promise to claim. Jesus said, *"But seek ye first the kingdom of God, and his righteousness; and all these things shall be added unto you"* (Matthew 6:33). Jesus also said, *"Give, and it shall be given unto you; good measure, pressed down, and shaken together, and running over, shall men give into your bosom. For with the same measure that ye mete withal it shall be measured to you again"* (Luke 6:38).

God's principle and plan is clear. His people are to give and trust Him to provide and take care of their needs. But first, His people must return unto Him and our hearts be right. Again, Jesus said, *"For where your treasure is, there will your heart be also"* (Matthew 6:21).

Amen.