

STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 10
Malachi 3:13-4:3
March 23, 2003

We come now to the sixth and last of the disputations that make up the prophecy of Malachi.

- v.14 We wonder, of course, what were the requirements that the people carried out. After all, Malachi has already indicated that they were a disobedient people by and large. The parallelism between “carrying out his commandments” and “going about like mourners” suggests that it is some kind of ritual mourning that is being referred to. In 2:13 Malachi had already condemned the people for a show of mourning and penitence before the Lord that was revealed to be nothing but their attempt to manipulate the Lord because they were uninterested in true repentance and real obedience. In Zechariah 7:1-6 also there is a similar reference to a ritual mourning on Israel’s part that was hypocritical. They went through all the proper motions at the temple and still the Lord wasn’t giving them what they want. What’s up with that? They were like the medieval lord who wore a hair shirt and was noted for his liturgical piety, but who caroused with women and was cruel to his serfs. Worship is being viewed as an activity that, by manipulating God’s favor, frees a person to live as he pleases. What an astonishing thing for people who consider themselves God’s people to think: that it is futile to serve God!
- v.15 The NIV’s “challenge” is the same word as “test” in 3:10 where the Lord invited his people to “test” him. God had invited his people to “test” him by obedience, not by disobeying him, as is the thought here. [Hugenberger, 31] People test God, in this case, by doing openly what God forbids; and, they seem to get away with their defiance. They aren’t punished. They don’t suffer. There seems to be no consequence for their disobedience. And so the people complain that the evildoers don’t suffer. Where is God in that? Of course, the people here called “evildoers” are simply the people who are doing other kinds of evil than the insolent and complaining Israelites are doing. Here is a case of the pot calling the kettle black. Israel may be sinful, but it can still see itself as righteous in comparison to others!
- v.16 Obviously there were those among the people who realized that God is never unfaithful and that it is the complainers who are blind to the situation, not God. The scroll of remembrance was probably a document that contained the names of all those who ascribed to some written commitment to the Lord, something like one of the Scottish covenants, for example. You have a similar thing, perhaps, in Nehemiah’s list of those who returned from exile, or Ezra 10, where we find a record of those who had married foreign women but who were willing to confess their sin publicly and, apparently, their intention to separate from their foreign wives. A still more likely comparison is the covenant renewal document found in Nehemiah 9-10 which ends with the list of those who signed it. Perhaps it was Malachi who drew up the document and secured the signatures. That it was written “in his presence” would mean that these faithful people had made this commitment before the Lord and unto him.

There is, however, the possibility that we are intended to think of the Lord himself as the writer of this document, or that it was at least written in heaven before him. In that case this scroll would be akin to “the books” in which are written the record of the lives of men and women, or even to “the book of life” in which are found the names of those whom God has saved and will save.

- v.18 “The day” is “the day of the Lord,” mentioned already in 3:2 and to be mentioned again in 4:1,3,and 5.

In connection with the fourth disputation, 2:17-3:5, we already spoke of the delay in the coming of that day, the necessity of patient waiting for it, and how utterly it will reverse the circumstances both that God’s faithful people face in this world and that the wicked experience. It is not true that the wicked have nothing to fear from the Lord and it is not true that the righteous are no better off. The day will show how utterly untrue those sentiments are. The people have been complaining that there seems to be no visible difference between the righteous and the wicked, at least in the way in which God treats them in this world. Well, the difference is going to be made visible on the day of the Lord, but, as we saw in 3:2, many in Israel who are complaining about God’s lack of justice will find that on that day God numbers them with the wicked and not with the righteous. Malachi and the other prophets are at pains to disabuse the unbelieving and disobedient among the people of that fatally mistaken notion that the day of the Lord would bring blessing for them. But, on that day the distinction between the wicked and the righteous will be made perfectly visible as the wicked are cast into punishment and the righteous are brought near to God to receive his blessing. Notice by the way the definitions of righteousness and wickedness given here: the righteous are those who serve God, the wicked are those who do not. It is not just a matter of thinking loyal thoughts, it is a matter of living a life of loyalty to the Lord.

- 4:1 Fire is often an image used to describe the effects of the judgment of the Lord. Malachi had already referred to the “refiner’s fire” in 3:2. It is important always to remember that this is metaphorical language, as is most of the language in the Bible used to describe the punishment of the wicked and unbelieving. Far too often Christians have made a difficult doctrine more difficult by being overly literal in its interpretation of these figures of speech, as if hell were God actually holding an unbeliever’s hand in the fire forever and ever. Always the day of the Lord has this double effect: the vindication of the righteous and the punishment of the wicked. We cannot pray for the second coming, *maranatha*, without, in effect, praying for both results at once.
- v.2 “sun of righteousness will rise with healing in his wings” is also a complex figure of speech. The Egyptians represented the sun as a disk with wings representing its rays. The rising sun will dispel the darkness and bring healing, salvation, prosperity to the faithful followers of the Lord. Zechariah uses the same figure in his benedictus in Luke 1:78-79.
- v.3 The friskiness of young calves was, for people in that agrarian society, an image of exuberance and joy.

Now, this evening I'm not going to deal with the disputation as a whole. I will leave that for next Lord's Day evening. I want rather to concentrate our attention on the first part of v. 16: "Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard." This is the only narrative in the Book of Malachi. I want to speak not so much about the fact that these people, obviously a distinct minority among Israel as a whole, were pious, faithful, and devout. But, rather, about how that piety and faithfulness were expressed in conversation. They talked with each other, with speech they stirred one another up to love and good deeds, and it was their spiritual conversation that the Lord took special notice of.

We are all very aware of how often our conversation is anything but spiritual, and how often we must review our conversation with regret. Listen to this from Alexander Whyte and see if it does not describe you. I admit that it certainly describes me.

"A holy man used to say when he returned home from a night of table-talk that he would never accept such an invitation again, so remorseful did such nights always leave him; so impossible did he find it for him to hold his peace, and to speak only at the right moment, and only in the right way. And, without his holiness, I have often had his remorse, and so, I am quite sure, have many of you. There is no table we sit at very long that we do not more or less ruin either to ourselves or to someone else. We either talk too much, and thus weary and disgust people; or they weary and disgust us. We start ill-considered, unwise, untimely topics. We blurt out our rude minds in rude words. We push aside our neighbour's opinion, as if both he and his opinion were worthless, and we thrust forward our own as if wisdom would die with us. We do not put ourselves into our neighbour's place. We have no imagination in conversation, and no humility, and no love. We lay down the law, and we instruct people who could buy us in one end of the market and sell us in the other if they thought us worth the trouble. It is easy to say grace; it is easy to eat and drink in moderation and with decorum and refinement; but it is our tongue that so ensnares us. For some men to command their tongue; to bridle, and guide, and moderate, and make just the right use of their tongue, is a conquest in religion, and in morals, and in good manners, that not one in a thousand of us has yet made over ourselves. [But Christ was such a one.] And much as I would have liked to see how he acted in everything, especially would I have watched him how he guided, and steered, and changed, and moderated, and sweetened the talk of the table." [*Walk, Character, and Conversation...*, 244-246]

But here were brothers and sisters that used their conversation to deepen one another's faith, who did not tear down but built up, who did not curse but blessed. And the Lord listened carefully to that conversation of theirs and took note of it. What a different place this would be – and I am by no means beyond believing that there is a great deal of very godly and useful and helpful and encouraging conversation that goes on among us here – but what a different place this would be if only all of us, all the time, set out to talk with each other, and about each other, as befits the fear of the Lord. Words are powerful things! Think back to the last several times you were unhappy or discouraged, and I bet you will find that your unhappiness was due to something you said or something that someone else said. And sometimes that was a regret, an unhappiness that stayed with you for days. To be entirely truthful, if you are a Christian, and you have not been

the victim of some terrible physical violence, chances are that the worst sorrows you have suffered in life have come from words that were spoken cruelly, words that were critical, sarcastic, humiliating, hurtful, angry, or malicious.

Words are powerful things. And well spoken, holy words are the most powerful words of all. There were folk who were discouraged in Malachi's day. They were not the complainers, they were not the disobedient who were blind to their disobedience. They loved the covenant of God. It was precisely because they loved it that they were longing for the Lord to come and show himself and vindicate his name and as the years passed and the nation slipped further and further into a spirit of indifference to God's covenant, they became discouraged. But, because they had true faith in their hearts, all they needed was some holy conversation with other believers and they found themselves buoyed up and rejuvenated in their faith and hope.

Others, perhaps, were growing dull and worldliness was creeping over their hearts, and then some wise, spiritually minded, uplifting conversation reminded them who they were, what they were called to be and do, and their hearts were astir and on fire again.

Do you remember what Christian said when he and Hopeful came to the Enchanted Ground. "Now, then, to prevent drowsiness in this place, let us fall into good discourse." And then Bunyan adds this verse:

When saints do sleepy grow, let them come hither,
And hear how these two pilgrims talk together:
Yea, let them learn of them, in any wise,
Thus to keep ope their drowsy, slumb'ring eyes.
Saints' fellowship, if it be managed well,
Keeps them awake, and that in spite of hell.

I know myself what blessing and benefit I get from good conversation. I prize those people whose conversation always stimulates me and helps me. I will always remember Bill McColley, Dawn Darby's late father, for this. I never left a conversation with him without having learned something useful and without having been stimulated in some worthy way. I think the same of my friend Ian Hamilton. And I can say the same of others I know, including some of you.

But, we all know how easily and without careful thought or control words escape our mouths that would have been better left unsaid, and how hard it is to speak only that which should be said. I don't mean that we should only talk about sacred things, that we should only speak seriously. It is the Bible that says that laughter is good medicine for the soul. What it actually says is that "a cheerful heart is good medicine," but that is what it is talking about. We can do good to people talking about all manner of things.

But, I'm sure we can say two things for sure about this conversation that so helped the saints in Malachi's day and so impressed the Lord. First, there must have been plenty of the Lord and his grace, goodness, and faithfulness in it. And, second, there must have been no harm in it. And that is what should be true of our conversation also.

We should take care to do no harm, but only good, with the words we speak both to and about others. I've been reminded in recent days how quickly words spread, and the bad words spread much more quickly and travel much further than the good ones do. Pascal reminds us that if only our friends knew what we have said about them behind their back we wouldn't have four friends left in the world. But, very often, what we say about others that love would not have said, what did not build up either the person about whom we spoke or to the person to whom we spoke, travels farther than we ever intended. In the age of the internet, I have had remarks of mine travel from coast to coast and then get back to me from people I don't even know. How careful we must be what we say to and about others.

The story is told of St. Philip Neri (1515-1595) that he gave a most unusual penance to a novice who was guilty of spreading malicious gossip. He told him to take a feather pillow to the top of a church tower on a blustery day and there release all the feathers to the wind. Then he was to come down from the tower, collect all the feathers dispersed over the far countryside, and put them back into the pillow. Of course, the poor novice couldn't do it, and that was precisely Philip Neri's point about the great evil of tale bearing. [R.J. Neuhaus, *First Things*, 121 (March 2002) 74-75] And not only the spreading of lies does so much harm. As Blake's couplet has it

The truth that's told with ill intent
Beats all the lies you can invent.

It was said by a friend of Alexander Smellie, the late 19th and early 20th century Free Church Scottish Presbyterian, that "after almost fifty years of friendship I can testify that I never heard him say a word of anyone which was ungenerous or unworthy." [In Gammie, *Preachers I Have Heard*, 95] What a splendid, what an astonishing thing to say about anyone and what a grand recommendation of a Christian.

We should make it our considered and definite practice and intention to do no harm with the words we speak. That is only the beginning, but it is a very important beginning. If we do not do this, the good words we speak will have much less effect. Let us tell the Lord that we will not speak to anyone's disadvantage and that, in those rare cases when hard truths must be spoken, we will speak them to the fewest possible people and, to them, we will moderate, as far as is possible, the sting of that truth.

But, even more important, we should take care to bless in our speech, to build up, to encourage, to appreciate, and to bring to bear the truth of God that lifts us up to him.

That is what these believers did and it was this conversation that the Lord himself listened to so carefully. They were like Jonathan who went to David and encouraged him in the Lord. They did what Paul told the Ephesians to do: "Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen." [4:29] "Words from a wise man's mouth are gracious..." we read in Ecclesiastes 10:12, and these were wise men and women who spoke gracious words.

You remember C.S. Lewis' point that no one really knows how bad he is until he has tried very hard to be good. Well, if you are content with your speaking, if you do not think there is a lesson here of great importance for you. I urge you to try very hard over this next week only to bless

those you speak to. Don't go into your next conversation with only a view to amusing yourself or winning an argument or gaining some benefit. Don't even begin to speak out of mere habit and with no real intention of any kind. Begin to speak with the intention of leaving that person better off when you are done. Nothing you may have hoped to get from the conversation is as important as that!

I remember years ago someone came out to see Florence and me for the purpose of encouragement. He went around encouraging ministers and their wives. He took us out to dinner and talked the whole time about himself. We could hardly get a word in edgewise. We didn't mind because we got a free dinner, but it was a lesson for me in how easily a conversation can become something other than what it is supposed to be and do something other than what it is supposed to do. Words are too hard to control. If you are not intentional with them, they will get away from you and either do things you didn't want to do or simply do nothing at all.

No, come to church Sunday by Sunday intending to bless those to whom you speak. Be sure that you have not left this house of worship without having spoken generously to and about a number of people. Spread your appreciation and compliments widely. Be willing to listen and to speak sparingly, so that others may speak, and then speak only to build up and encourage. And what you do on Sunday here, do the rest of the week.

All you have to do is to remember that God stoops to listen very carefully to that kind of speaking, to the kind of conversation that both expresses reverence for God and honors his name, on the one hand, and encourages others to do the same on the other. Whether a scroll of remembrance will be written, I cannot say, but that God will remember what you say when you speak so, of that there is no doubt. And if it is harder to speak with such intention and such care of others and such consideration for God, if it takes greater concentration on your part – as it will and must – then just remember the Day of the Lord and how glad you will be on that day that you spoke as you did.

Listen, if I have learned anything in the years of my ministry it is how many words are spoken to ill effect and how often people either only rarely or never have spoken to them the words they long to hear and need to hear. That is true in many homes and families, it is true in many workplaces, and it is still too much true in the church. We have the power to bless others with words, with our speech. We rarely appreciate what power there is in the right kinds of words, in loving words, in encouraging words. You ask a wife and she can tell you what words her husband spoke to her and what they meant to her even if they were spoken years ago. Ask a young woman and she can tell you what her father said to her or what she always wished he would say but never did. Ask a worker and he or she can tell you what the boss says and what the boss never says. The world is awash with words, but most of them are the wrong kind of words.

I'm not sure that there will be anything that more obviously and distinctly separates the righteous from the wicked as the words that come out of their mouths and, perhaps especially, when they are speaking to another human being. Whether it is a husband or wife, a son or daughter, a mother or father, a Christian friend or an unbelieving acquaintance. If there is *aliquid Christi* in our conversation always, if there is love and the fear of God, if there is faith and the desire to

please the Lord, if there is respect and interest shown to another, if there is sympathy and understanding, then with our words we are doing something significant, powerful, and important indeed; more significant, more powerful, more important than virtually anything else we ever do. *“And the Lord listened and heard”!*