

Malachi 2:17-3:12 (1984 NIV)
Be Slow To Cry Justice

^{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?”

^{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.

² 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.

³ 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,

⁴ and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵ “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.

⁶ “I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

⁷ 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.

“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’

⁸ “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings.

⁹ You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me.

¹⁰ 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.

¹¹ I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the LORD Almighty.

¹² “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty.

Introduction

Until the premature death of his son from progeria (rapid aging), Harold Kushner (a prominent American rabbi) believed that God was all-good and all-powerful. This tragic death caused him to re-examine his beliefs and resulted in his best-selling book *When Bad Things Happen to Good People*.

Using the book of Job as a background, Rabbi Kushner suggests there are three things all of us would like to believe:

1. God is all-powerful and causes everything that happens.
2. God is just and fair, giving everyone what they deserve.
3. Job is a good person.

As long as Job is healthy and happy, one can believe in all three of these. But in view of Job’s righteous suffering, Rabbi Kushner concludes that we cannot hold on to both 1 and 2.

What then is the solution to Job’s tragedy? Why do good people suffer such bad things? The Rabbi’s answer is that “God wants the righteous to live peaceful, happy lives, but sometimes even He can’t bring that about” (p. 43).

Of course it is always possible that God would like to do better but He is hampered by His limitations in power. As a matter of fact, says Kushner, “There are some things God does not control ...” (p. 45).

For Kushner this conclusion is not necessarily all bad. For there “is a sense of relief” in coming to the conclusion that God is not all-powerful. For if this is so, then “our misfortunes are none of His doing” (p. 44). Thus Kushner asserts, “I can worship a God who hates suffering but cannot eliminate it more easily than I can worship a God who chooses to make children suffer and die, for whatever exalted reason” (p. 134).

(<http://plafgridz.tripod.com/FetherPDFs/Bad%20Things%20Good%20People.pdf>)

Our experiences in life can change the way we view or believe God. The prophet Malachi had to deal with this same issue in his time—i.e. people were wondering why God was not doing something to correct the sins and the corruption in the land. The only answer that they could come up with was that evil was good in the eyes of God; that God was not just. The prophet came down hard on this kind of thinking. He made it very clear that if they really wanted the justice of God to be meted out, no one could stand!

This section of the prophetic message is tied to the coming of the “messenger of the covenant” in 3:1. In OT anticipation of the end times, the prophets wrote of the coming of the Messiah. Israel’s prophets looked forward to that golden age when the Messiah would come and judge the wicked and reward the righteous by setting up his reign of righteousness and peace.

The people in Malachi’s time cried for God to intervene in their situation with His justice. BUT God seemed so slow and unwilling to act.

So, the people grew tired of waiting. They grew tired of doing what’s good. They grew tired of living righteously. They grew tired of remaining faithful to God. They turned cold spiritually. They suffered from righteousness fatigue.

There are two human weaknesses that can cause God’s people to be tired of righteous living.

I. Self-righteousness can cause God’s people to be tired of righteous living (2:17-3:5).

There were those who came to the conclusion that people who did wickedly were good in the eyes of the LORD. They must have concluded that since God is a righteous God he should have done something to judge the sinners. But since he did not, he must have been approving what they were doing. They said it this way, “Where is the God of justice?” Why was God not doing anything about the sin in the land?

Malachi told his people that their questions wearied God. He was fed up. Yet God would still refrain from judging swiftly these people who thought of themselves as so right and of others as so wrong. God will only act in His own time and according to His own timetable.

The prophet told his audience that their request was presumptuous—if they really wanted the justice of God then they too would be in trouble. No one could stand under divine justice, including them. But the Judge would come some day to judge all.

Actually, 3:1 has two persons in mind—“Behold, I am about to send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.”

The word “Behold” is a way to express the imminent future. It is what God is about to do. In Matthew 11, Jesus made it clear that this was a prophecy pointing to John the Baptist as the “messenger who would prepare the way”. John was to prepare the way before the coming of the LORD. Isaiah 40 also prophesies that John will be a voice in the desert preparing the way of the LORD. The imagery of building a super highway refers to spiritual preparation—the crooked places in the heart have to be straightened so that people would receive the Messiah. John came preaching repentance to prepare people for the Messiah, the Lamb of God.

The second figure in this prophecy is also a messenger, but he is called the “messenger of the covenant”—i.e. the one who is going to bring in the covenant. This would refer to the New Covenant prophesied in Jeremiah 31, Ezekiel 36, and Isaiah 54. One thing is said about this messenger. He is the one that they all strongly desired—He is the Messiah whom people have been longing for. So this “messenger of the covenant” points to the Lord Jesus Himself—God in the flesh; the Messiah of Israel. But the people of Israel knew Him not when He first came in human flesh.

In 3:2, the rhetorical question is asked, “Who can endure the day of his coming?” The implication is that no one could survive divine judgment. The reason is that His coming will be like a laundryman’s soap and a refiner’s fire. This did not happen when Jesus was here on earth. His first coming was to establish who He is, to pay for the sins of the world, and to gain victory over death. His second coming will usher in His 1,000-year reign on earth with His people, and thereafter, His final judgment on all (Rev. 20).¹

Then in 3:5, we see that this final judgment will be swift and against the sins of the people. God will be the witness and the judge that these crimes have been committed—sorcery, adultery, perjury, defrauding workers, oppressing the widows and orphans, and depriving foreigners of justice. The judgment is not simply for these sins, but for people who did not fear the LORD.

The sins that the prophet listed here covered a wide array of crimes, from the gross violations of the moral code to the breakdown of social justice. And so Malachi’s message continued to convict the so-called good people of his day of their failure to do the works of righteousness themselves.

When God’s justice comes, it will not only judge the unrighteousness of God’s enemies, but also the self-righteousness of God’s people.

¹ I am interpreting Rev. 20 from a pre-tribulation position.

During Sunday school, a teacher told the children in her class about the Pharisee and the tax-collector praying in the temple (Luke 18:10-14). She said that the Pharisee prayed, “God, I thank you that I’m not like other people,” while the tax-collector said, “God, be merciful to me, a sinner.” The teacher explained how the self-righteous attitude of the Pharisee caused him to look down on the tax-collector.

The teacher then picked out a boy sitting at the back of the class and asked him, “Who do you think is God happy with—the Pharisee or the tax-collector?”

“The tax-collector,” answered the boy without hesitation.

“Good! And whose example do you like to follow—that of the Pharisee or that of the tax-collector?”

“The tax-collector,” the boy answered again without any hesitation.”

The teacher responded, “Very good! And for answering so well, you can close our class today in prayer.”

The boy stood up proudly, clasped his hands, looked up to heaven, and prayed, “God, praise you and thank you. Praise you and thank you ... that I am not like that Pharisee! Amen!”

There’s always a bit of self-righteousness in each of us. So be slow to cry justice but be quick to deal with the self-righteousness in us.

How do we recognize self-righteousness in ourselves?

- When we look at someone and feel somehow superior or better because we keep some part of biblical teachings that we think that someone is violating—that is self-righteousness.
- When someone is hurt by our words or actions, and we adamantly try to defend ourselves instead of confessing and asking forgiveness—that is self-righteousness.
- When we think others do not live up to our standards, and that keeps us correcting, judging, and complaining about others—that is self-righteousness.
- When we constantly use ourselves or our experience as an example of how to do something right—that is self-righteousness.
- When we need help from others but refuse it when offered because we are too proud to accept it—that is self-righteousness.

Some personal steps to check self-righteousness:

- Ask the Lord to search and reveal our heart.

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- Confess our arrogance.
- Humble ourselves in repentance.
- Extend grace and not condemnation to others.
- Be open to learn from others.
- Consider both positive and negative comments about us objectively.

There's always a bit of self-righteousness in each of us. So be slow to cry justice but be quick to deal with the self-righteousness in us.

There's a second human weakness that can cause God's people to be tired of righteous living.

II. Selfishness can cause God's people to be tired of righteous living (3:6-12).

This section of the message begins with a firm doctrinal statement—"God does not change." He will judge sin and He will always love His people. The people of God in Malachi's time should find this statement comforting because in spite of their failures, God does not change. If He did, they would be consumed on the spot. They were His always beloved even though they had not always loved Him.

God then reminded the people that they had failed time and time again, ever since the time of their forefathers. But He had always been there to call them to repentance so that they could enjoy His blessings. Here again He called for them to return. The verb "return" in Hebrew is often a call for repentance, to turn back from sins.

So the assurance of God's unchanging faithfulness is not a license to remain unfaithful to Him. He calls us to return. Once again Malachi's audience was indignant when they questioned, "How are we to return?" The implication is that they did not see that they had any need to repent. So Malachi spelt out a specific indictment against them—i.e. robbing God. They showed their unfaithfulness to God in their stewardship. The people had not been paying their tithes, and so the whole land was under a curse—devastation of crops by pests and fruitlessness of vines in fields (vv. 9-11).

Today, to tithe commonly means simply to give 10%. But in the Old Testament, the system of tithes and offerings was far more complex. There is ...

- The giving to the priesthood
- The basic tithe
- The pilgrimage tithe (for each of the three annual pilgrimages to Jerusalem)
- The tithe for the poor (every other year)

Altogether then the tithing would total well over 20% in any given year.

Now this did not count the offerings, the animals that were to be brought to the three annual pilgrimage festivals (i.e. Passover, Weeks, and Tents). It did not include the extra money to be paid for sin offerings. They were also to leave the corners of their fields for the poor to glean; and they were to take care of the widow, orphan, and the stranger. On top of all that, they could at any time offer a free-will thanksgiving offering, meaning more animals and gifts. So then, if someone today wants to give as under the Law of Israel, the amount would exceed way, way beyond 10% a year!

In the New Testament, the outlook is quite different. Everything belongs to God, and we give proportionately as a token of our acknowledgment of this truth as the Lord prospers us. Our time, our possessions, our abilities—these are all part of our stewardship—these are gifts from God.

Malachi called for the people to test God's faithfulness. Give and see how God will take care of you. This is not to guarantee that you will get back your money plus a handsome increase. Malachi called the people to give by faith out of gratitude, not as a way of manipulating God to give back to them with interests.

Let me state two summary principles related to the application of OT tithing/offering for today.

1. Tithing is a good benchmark for believers. In other words, it's a good place to start. The Old Testament gives a command to tithe by setting a standard of percentage giving. In the New Testament the command becomes a model as we're urged to practice proportional giving. The emphasis is on liberality, not limitation. In the NT, Christians are taught NOT to give legalistically as keepers of God's Law, but to give cheerfully as lovers after God's heart. We are not bound by percentages but free to give as the Holy Spirit directs our hearts in love. The OT tithe (10%) is not an absolute but a benchmark that we could use as a helpful guide in directing our giving today. Paul says in 2 Cor. 9:7, "Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver." Giving in the NT is no longer according to the requirement of the Law but according to the love of a willing and cheerful heart.
2. Tithing is a good reminder of who's in charge. When I give at least 10%, it's a way to be reminded that God owns everything that I have. When giving to God, we're just taking our hands off what belongs to Him in the first place. God is in charge of the little that I can give into His hands. He can turn my little into His much when placed in His hands. God is also in charge of the little that I may have in my hands. His grace is sufficient to overcome my deficiency so that I shall not lack even though I may seem limited.

Mal. 3:10 is the only place in the Bible where God tells us to test Him—“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.” To “test” here means to prove something as true. It doesn’t sound right, does it?

From the mouth of Christ—“Do not put the Lord your God to the test” (Matt. 4:7). Was Christ not aware of Mal. 3:10? Indeed, He was. Yet, Jesus still quoted Deut. 6:16 to affirm that we should not put the Lord our God to the test.

In Matt. 4, Satan was trying to manipulate Jesus to do what he wanted Jesus to do by using Scripture. But Jesus refuted him by saying, “Don’t put God to the test.”

We’re warned about not putting God to the test and yet when it comes to giving, God invites us to test Him in Mal. 3:10. This is because the real issue is not money, but trust. When we decide to give to the Lord, we then have the opportunity to trust His faithfulness to meet our needs.

God is saying, “I dare you! Test me in this way to see if I really exist or not.” God allows Himself to be put on trial. He doesn’t have to subject Himself to this. He could have simply told us to give because He demands it and that’s that. But He wants us to get to know Him in a much deeper way. Is He alive? Is He real? Does He love me? Will He keep His promises? One of the best ways to find out is to start giving.

If Mal. 3:10 is a command for us, its purpose is to bring about spiritual growth and help us return to God. Mal. 3:10 is not a call to raise funds. Rather it is a call to return to God from faithlessness and disobedience; to turn away from an obsessive self love to obeying the Law to love God and others. The call in Mal. 3:10 is a call to return to God, not a call to look for prosperity. For the people of God in Malachi’s time, it was a call to give to God in renewed faithfulness and obedience so that they could see God lifting away the curse of crop devastation and vine fruitlessness in their land.

God’s love for us is unchanging. But His desire for us is not to indulge in self love. His desire is for us to love Him and love others as we love ourselves.

Our giving today reflects who and how much we love, and it defines what things are important to us. A call to return to God is often a call to love as God has commanded us—to love Him and love others as we love ourselves.

A call to return to God is often a call to review what’s really important to us—God’s kingdom or the things of our earthly existence. God reassures us, “You

take care of the concerns of my heart, and I will take care of the concerns of your earthly existence” (Matt. 6:33).

Testimony of Dr. Richard Teo: He was a 40-year-old millionaire and cosmetic surgeon. Let me read out an abridged version of his testimony shared on 24 Nov 2011 at a Dental Christian Fellowship Meeting, eight months after he was diagnosed with stage-4 lung cancer.

“I’d just begin to say that I’m a typical product of today’s society ... From young, I’ve always been under the influence and impression that to be happy, is to be successful. And to be successful, is to be wealthy. So I led my life according to this motto.

And that was what I did—liposuction, breast augmentation, eyelid surgeries, you name it, we do it. It was very good money.

I have been a Christian for 20 years; I was baptised 20 years ago, but it was because it was fashionable to be a Christian then. All my friends were becoming Christians then. It was fashionable! I wanted to be baptised, so that when I filled in a form, I could put there ‘Christian’—feels good. In truth, I had never had a Bible; I don’t know what the Bible is all about.

In March 2011, out of the blues—I was still running around, because I’m a gym freak and I always go to the gym training, running, swimming six days a week. I had some backache, and that’s all I had, but it was persistent. And so I went for an MRI to exclude prolapsed disc ... And the next day, they found that half my spine had bone marrow replacement.

We had a PET scan ... and they diagnosed that I had terminal lung cancer, stage 4B. It had spread to the brain, half the spine, whole of my lungs were filled with tumour, liver, adrenals ...

I couldn’t accept it. I have a hundred relatives on both sides, my mom and my dad. 100 of them. And not a single one has cancer. To me, in my mind, I have good genes, I’m not supposed to be having this! I was in denial.

So the next day, I was still in a state of denial, still unable to accept what was going on ... And there I was, lying on the operating table, staring blankly at the ceiling in a cold, quiet operating theatre. Suddenly I just heard an inner voice; it was not like coming from outside. It was inside. This small inner voice that I had never felt before. And it said very specifically, it said, ‘This has to happen to you, at your prime, because it’s the only way you can understand.’ ... At that time, my emotions just overflowed and I broke down and cried, alone there. And

I knew then, subsequently, what it means to understand that why this is the only way.

Because I had been so proud of myself, my whole life, I needed nobody else. I was gifted with things that I could do, why do I need anybody else? I was just so full of myself that there was no other way I could have turned back to God.

There is nothing wrong with being rich or wealthy. I think it's absolutely alright, because God has blessed. So many people are blessed with good wealth, but the trouble is I think a lot of us can't handle it. The more we have, the more we want. I've gone through it, the deeper the hole we dig, the more we get sucked into it, so much so that we worship wealth and lose focus. Instead of worshipping God, we worship wealth. It's just a human instinct. It's just so difficult to get out of it.

So my thoughts are, when you start to build up wealth and when the opportunity comes, do remember that all these things don't belong to us. We don't really own it nor have rights to this wealth. It's actually God's gift to us. Remember that it's more important to further His Kingdom rather than to further ourselves."

Dr. Richard Teo passed on to be with the Lord on 18 Oct 2012.

(<http://www.heavenaddress.com/Dr-Richard-Teo-Keng-Siang/424153/379719/content>)

When we love ourselves and only ourselves, we grow tired of living righteously because to so live is to love God and to love others as well—i.e. to think of ourselves less and to think of God and others more. And we don't like that if we are full of self love. However, we are God's always beloved. Hence He wants us to have a healthy love of ourselves as well. But He wants us to love not just ourselves only. He wants us to love Him and others as we love ourselves. When God's justice comes, He will not only judge those who love the devil, but also those who love themselves so much that they love only themselves.

And if people who claim to be believers are not doing what 3:5 says—helping people in need, championing justice for the oppressed and the stranger—then they better think twice about calling for the God of justice to step in.

Conclusion

Malachi calls people to order their lives aright in view of the coming of the LORD's judgment. I believe these people will not lose their status as God's saved ones, but they certainly will miss out on something that He has for them IF they have persevered in a righteous and self-giving lifestyle here on earth.

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When God's justice comes, it will not only judge His enemies, but also the self-righteousness and selfishness of His people.

- Where have you been guilty of thinking yourself as so right and others as so wrong?
- Where have you been guilty of living with so much love for self but so little love for God and others?

God is calling His people to turn away from obnoxious self-righteousness and obsessive self love.

How are you going to respond to His call?

Be slow to cry justice but quick to deal with the self-righteousness and selfishness in us lest we cry judgment upon ourselves.

May the gracious Lord be merciful and help us. Amen!

Reflection Questions

1. What are some forms of obnoxious self-righteousness and obsessive self love that Christians can be guilty of expressing? How can Christians guard themselves against these?
2. How should we use Mal. 3:10 to challenge and encourage God's people to give money to help various needs? Reflect/Discuss.