

The faithless and the faithful

19/4/20 dkm

Read: Malachi 3, Matthew 23:15-33

Text: Malachi 3:13-18

Psalms: 135:1-7, 37:1-7 old, 56:1-8, 134

As we look into the world today we see people worshipping a multitude of gods, including those who think they are a god themselves. To them belongs the motto, 'He is a self-made man who worships his creator'. We live in a world that cries out for inclusion, a world that says no one can be excluded no matter how foolish their belief or wicked their lifestyle. As the true and living God looks upon the world that he made, he sees only two kinds of people, those who believe and worship him, and unbelievers who do not worship him; in OT terminology, those who fear God and those who don't. Jesus made it clear that when he returns, people from all nations will appear before his judgment throne (Mat 25:31, 32). At this judgment there will be only two types of people, appropriately labelled, sheep and goats. I say appropriate because sheep follow the shepherd, but goats follow no one.

A feature of the book of Malachi is dialogue between God and his people. The dialogue begins after the people question God in an insolent manner, a manner similar to the Pharisees and Sadducees asking Jesus trick questions. We come to the last of these questions here at the end of chapter 3. In typical fashion they ask God, 'How' or 'What have we spoken against you?' (3:13). Previous questions were, 'How have you loved us? How have we despised your name and defiled you? How have we wearied you, asking where is the God of justice? How shall we return and how have we robbed you?' Counting the double-barrelled 'Hows' as two, we find seven in all.

The subjects of these questions reveal the depths of the people's depravity. They doubted God's love, God's holiness, God's justice or righteousness, and God's faithfulness. They were bringing dishonour to the name of God by sacrificing sick, lame and blind animals, and robbing God of tithes and offerings that were rightfully his. Have any

of these attitudes found a place in your heart of late? If we are honest we will admit to such questioning at some time in our past. The psalmist admitted to envying the wicked in their prosperity (Ps 73). Ananias and Sapphira did not admit to keeping back part of their gift to the Lord (Acts 5). These are serious matters. The Lord will not be mocked or have his name dragged through the dirt, as we say. In these few verses from Malachi 3 we note firstly, faithless people, then, faithful people, and finally, a faithful God.

1. Faithless people

The Lord hears harsh words spoken against him by the people, words not immediately revealed to us. What is revealed is their insolent reply: 'What have we spoken against you?' (3:13). Not only had they spoken harsh words but they tried to deny it, or to blame others. These people would blame God for not making them rich like their godless neighbours. It is of the nature of a proud heart to see the sin of others but not one's own sin (Mat 7:3). It is also of the nature of sin to envy others, even the wicked- the apostle Paul calls it coveting (Rom 7:7-8).

The Lord reminds them of their words in the next verse (3:14). They seem more confronting and culpable than 'harsh', especially when we recall that this is the God who said, 'I have loved you' (1:2) and 'I do not change' (3:6). This is the God whom they could call their Father, a God who is not a lump of wood or stone but a living and loving God. God can be disappointed and hurt by our words and actions, but like any father he will see that rebellion and disobedience are punished.

'It is useless to serve God' they said (3:14). They gave themselves a big pat on the back for fronting up at the house of God with their sacrifices - albeit sick, lame and otherwise useless animals. With a materialistic or mercenary spirit they thought God should give them something in return, something tangible, and something they could show off to their 'wicked' neighbours. A preacher of the prosperity

gospel got a flash new car which he said was an answer to prayer. He said that a servant of God should have the best to show that God was blessing him. He found it profitable to serve God, at least for the moment. I can only guess at what happened to him when God took away his flash car, his mansion, and his collection of other material things. He may have been like Job, but somehow I think he would be more like the people Malachi speaks of: 'What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and walked like mourners before almighty God' (3:14).

How widespread is this mercenary attitude towards worshipping God? How many have left the church feeling that God has let them down? A woman came to this church with her teenage daughter hoping that a 'dose of religion' would solve her problems; she left before the sermon was finished! She was not a believer, but even professing Christians can slip into this pattern of thinking. Remember the psalmist who envied the wicked in their prosperity saying, 'My steps had nearly slipped' (Ps 73:1, 2). Thankfully, his thinking was refocussed when he went into the holy place, refocussed on the meaning and goal of life as taught in the Bible. Similarly, the prodigal son of the parable refocussed his thinking after attempting to enjoy life like the wicked.

The people of Malachi's day, like many today, think that keeping the commandments of God stops them having fun, or stops them getting rich. They resent keeping the Sabbath day holy, and resent bringing their tithes and offerings to the Lord. These people were blind to the blessings they enjoyed from the hand of God, or would have enjoyed if they had trusted God (cf.3:10). Do you enjoy reading your Bible and coming to worship? Be careful not to be overtaken by a mercenary spirit. Be careful not become cynical, or allow covetousness to rule in your heart.

In the end, the values of these faithless people were completely upended. With a mercenary spirit they measured men and their lives

by their possessions. They called the arrogant blessed and the wicked 'raised up' (3:15). They accused God of letting the wicked off the hook when they test and challenge him. They were accusing God of being unfair. How ironic! Here they were challenging God and accusing him of injustice, so in truth, they were no more deserving of God's blessing than the wicked. They were ready to judge others, even God, but were blind to the sin in their own hearts. Spiritual blindness is a serious malady. Jesus accused the Pharisees of blindness again and again (Mat 23:16, 17, 19, 24, 26). We must pray for one another that our eyes will be kept open to realities that extend beyond the physical to the spiritual, and beyond this world to the world to come.

2. Faithful people

Not all the people were faithless and finding fault with God. There were those who feared God, those who were faithful and from their hearts kept his commands. These were a remnant within the remnant. God kept a remnant through the exile, and now we find another remnant of faithful followers of the God of Israel, the Lord God almighty. Faithful people are those who fear or reverence God's holy name, people who worship God for who is, not for what they can get from him. These were people who enjoyed meeting with fellow god-fears or believers to worship God in spirit and in truth. These were people who esteemed or honoured the name of the Lord, people who cringed in horror when they heard God's name blasphemed, in breach of the third commandment.

The prophet assures these faithful few that, 'the Lord listened and heard them' (3:16). He heard their conversations and their prayers. To know that the King of kings and Lord of lords hears your prayer is wonderful is it not? Faithless people have no such assurance (Ps 66:16-20). Secondly, he indicates that the Lord records their words and deeds in a book of remembrance (3:16). Some liken this to the book kept by kings, like king Ahasuerus (Esther 6:1), but there are other references to the Lord keeping a record of all our words and

actions (Ps 56:8, Rev 20:12). The book kept by a king will disappear when he grows old and dies, but the book kept by God will never disappear. Those who don't fear God now will fear him on the day this book is opened. Thankfully, there is another book, the Book of Life, and your name will be written in this book when you confess your sin and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ.

3. Faithful God

Doubt undermines faith. Continuing doubt is dangerous. It can result in cynicism and blindness, as seen firstly in the priests (2:17), and then in the people (3:14, 15). It can result in questioning God's grace and goodness, not to mention his justice and his judgments. God does not change (3:6). We keep coming back to this truth, as I previously indicated. God always acts according to the covenant he makes with his chosen people. The people of Israel were God's chosen people. They were his special treasure above all the peoples on the face of the earth (3:17, Exod 19:5, 6, Deut 7:6). The Lord set them apart, calling them 'My people'. He was powerful to bless them, and bless them he would in the fullness of time, if they kept his covenant commands.

The inheritance of the Levites and priests was the Lord himself, but they seem to have forgotten this. Our inheritance is the Lord himself. Let us not forget this truth, and the promise that we have an inheritance kept in heaven for us (John 14:2, 3, 1Peter 1:4). We have no permanent home here on earth. Jesus tells us to lay up treasure in heaven not on this earth (Mat 6:19, 20). Too many Christians get confused about where their treasure should be, especially those who listen to the prosperity gospel that is so widely preached in our day.

The remnant preserved by God, 'shall be Mine' says the Lord almighty (3:17). 'On the day', the day of reckoning and the day of judgment, they shall be set apart as his treasured possession. He will spare these faithful few as a father 'spares his own son who serves him' (3:17). The love that God sets upon his people is covenant love,

love which is like the love of a father for his son. A son finds comfort and security in the love of his father. Faithful servants of the Lord similarly find comfort and security in the steadfast love of God.

We started this sermon talking about sheep and goats. As we come to the end we read, 'and you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked' (3:18). We live in a day when pluralism prevails, when people think any and every way of worship is equally valid and leads to some sort of heaven. When Christians assert that there is only one way to heaven they are accused of discrimination and hate speech. Sadly, some have drawn back to preach a social gospel, or the prosperity gospel that we mentioned. They are afraid to declare what Jesus declared: 'I am the way, the truth, and the life; no one comes to the Father except through me' (John 14:6). A gospel declaring that God loves everyone, and that all will go to heaven in the end, is more acceptable to the world.

A lack of discernment or discrimination is as rife today as it was in the days of Malachi (3:18). The priests were saying that the Lord delights in those who are evil, and the people were saying that the Lord blesses the arrogant and the wicked (2:17, 3:15). When people start calling evil, good, and good, evil, we know that the Day of Judgment is not far away. Remember, God does not change and he will judge everyone according to truth, his truth as declared in his word. There will be no 'ifs' or 'buts' or 'maybes', no grey area between the faithless and the faithful. God knows every heart and has a record of every life, and on this basis will judge everyone, except those whose names are written in the Book of Life, those who are saved by grace through faith in Jesus Christ our Lord.