

November 23, 2025

Return: Justice and the Unchanging God

Malachi 2:17-3:18

Vernon Advent Christian Church

Introduction...Have you ever looked at the world around you and felt that the world is not as it should be? This is a similar question to the one that was raised when the prophet Habakkuk was looking around at all the injustice and questioning what God was doing? Perhaps you've seen, or experienced, the wicked doing well while the honest struggle. Or maybe you've prayed faithfully and lived a God-honoring life, and yet, you still face hardship, while those who ignore God seem to have it easy. Well, you are not alone and that feeling of injustice is as old as humanity itself.

The people of Israel, living during the time of the prophet Malachi, felt this exact same way. They had become cynical and discontented and they begin to challenge God. Remember, Malachi is a series of disputes between God and Israel where God gives a charge, the people dispute it and then God gives His final answer and gives His reasons for the charge.

Well, after returning from exile, and after not seeing the blessings of God they were expecting, but yet still experiencing hardship, the people were tired of waiting for God to make things right. And, as we've seen, their worship practices had begun to suffer. They wanted swift action, a clear line drawn between the good and the bad, God's justice to be done and they weren't seeing it.

In our passage today, we come across the final set disputes that God brings to the attention of his people before one final prophecy in ch. 4 that will be our first Sunday into the Advent season. And just like last week, we will be breaking this passage into sections as we get to them, so you can remain seated and we will begin where we left off last week starting in ch. 2:17. [Read passage]

The people of God in Malachi's day were discouraged because it seemed like the wicked prospered had it better than they did. This filled them with doubt and unbelief, and they grumbled and tried to make the point that everyone who does evil must be good in the sight of the LORD.

When they compared themselves with others, they thought it was unjust of God to bless others and not them. Nevertheless, their question shows that they don't understand what the God of justice would give to them. And God's answer is a powerful promise, He will come, and He will judge. [Read 3:1]

This prophecy reveals a significant detail regarding the coming of the Messiah, namely, that His arrival would be preceded by another messenger sent by God. In an ancient royal procession, the messenger, or herald, went before the King to announce his arrival and to remove any obstacles in the road.

It's interesting, the Hebrew phrase for "my messenger" is the same as the meaning of Malachi's name (Malachi 1:1). Yet Malachi is not talking about himself but is predicting a future individual. Malachi 4:5 further identifies this special messenger as "Elijah the prophet," which we will get to next week.

The New Testament shows how this prediction is fulfilled. The Gospel of Mark begins by declaring John the Baptist as this messenger (Mark 1:2-4). In Matthew 11:13-14 Jesus states, "For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John, and if you are willing to accept it, he is Elijah who is to come."

John the Baptist is the only person who fits the description of the promised messenger. As God's messenger sent to prepare the way for the Lord, John was faithful to his calling and became one of the greatest prophets (Luke 7:28).

But the point is, who was he preparing the way for? In text, we know that it is God who is speaking, and He says that the messenger would prepare the way "before me." So, it is the LORD God Himself who was coming. Then, God says it is "the Lord" who will come, "the messenger of the covenant." So, Yahweh is equated with the Lord who was to come, and as we know, the prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus. Therefore, "Yahweh" and "the Lord" are equated with Jesus. This is the hope of the advent season that we are about to celebrate. God himself took on flesh and dwelt among us to break the curse of the garden and to redeem that which was lost. God's perfect justice would come in His promised Messiah, Jesus.

But, we're told this arrival isn't just a gentle visit, it's a refinery, meant not just for the wicked but for His people as well. [Read vs. 2-3]

When God comes to establish justice, it involves intense purification. A refiner's fire is hot, it separates the dross, or the impurities, from the pure metal. Likewise, fuller's, or launderer's, soap isn't just a gentle detergent. This type of soap was harsh and was used to remove deep stains from bright white clothing, much like we use bleach today. The point being, when Messiah comes he will cleanse the world of all impurity. Every stain of sin will be scrubbed away.

At the same time, notice his position, He will sit as a refiner. He is carefully working with the silver, burning off and scraping away the dross that the flames bring to the top. This indicates that this refining process isn't haphazard or on a whim, but that it is carefully planned and time consuming according to the purpose of the refiner.

And God promises a necessary, intense work of refinement, starting with the spiritual leaders ("the sons of Levi"). The goal is holiness, so that their worship and lives are acceptable to God once more.

When we ask, "Where is the God of justice?", we must realize that God's justice begins with us, His own people, before it addresses the world's wickedness. It is a work of purification, preparing us for a right relationship with Him.

II. The Call to Return and the Test of Tithing (3:6-12)

After promising his justice through his judgment and refinement process, God provides a foundation of comfort and a specific instruction to return to Him in repentance. [Read 3:6-12]

Vs. 6 is a crucial verse. If God were fickle, changing His mind based on our behavior, we would have been consumed by our sin long ago. But because God is unchanging in His covenant love and mercy, His people still have a chance to return to Him. His justice is tempered by His steadfast nature.

God's unchanging nature is the reason the descendants of Jacob have not been destroyed, despite their many failures and rebellions. His steadfastness, love, and

faithfulness to His covenant promise have preserved them. This passage emphasizes that their security is not based on their own actions but on God's character, offering hope that His promises will ultimately be fulfilled. The same is true for us as God's new covenant people.

The fact that God does not change provides a foundation for hope. Because God is who He says He is, we can trust in His love and power to ultimately fulfill His plans and don't have to wonder, or doubt, about what God is doing.

In the broader context of rest of ch. 3, this verse is the basis for the following exhortation for the people to return to God and be faithful. Which we see immediately in the next verse where he calls them to return, and they ask, "How shall we return?" (3:7).

The specific area where they had strayed from a true heart of worship, was not only seen their half-hearted worship through their bringing unacceptable sacrifices, but apparently was also seen in their lack of tithing. Not only were they bringing sick or lame animals as sacrifices, they were also not bringing in their full tithe. [Read vs. 8]

They were withholding what was due to God, treating His provisions as their own. It was a failure to trust God with their finances, and at it's basic level, just like their unacceptable sacrifices, it was a symptom of a heart issue. They weren't trusting God to provide what they needed.

The idea of robbing God seems inconceivable. At first, Israel denied the charge. Their hearts were so hardened and cold that they were blind to the fact that they had abandoned their first love for the Lord. God then specifically explained that the people of Israel were robbing Him by bringing only part of their tithes and offerings to the temple. In their tightfisted, self-centered state, they were cheating God, failing to bring Him the whole tithe and the required offerings to the temple.

The law mandated that a tithe, or a tenth, of the produce of the land be given to the Lord (Leviticus 27:30). Specific offerings were required, as well. (explain)

When the people held back portions of the tithes and offerings for themselves, they were breaking the law and, in effect, robbing God. They were taking what belonged to God and using it for themselves.

So the Lord called the people to return to Him and put Him first and He issues a challenge, a test, one of the only places in scripture where he says do so. [Read vs. 10]

Sermons on this passage often focus solely on the mechanics of tithing, but the deeper point is trust and obedience. God invites His people to trust Him with their most basic needs, to prioritize His kingdom, and see if He won't provide abundantly. Repentance means acknowledging God's ownership of everything we have and honoring Him with our first fruits. This act of giving is part of the purification process, aligning our hearts with His kingdom priorities.

Which leads us to the final section of our passage today. [Read 3:13-18]

Here we see another complaint. The people had come to believe that serving God was useless. They concluded that the arrogant and wicked were blessed because they got away with testing God and prospered.

They complained to God that it was "vain to serve Him" and asked what they gained by keeping His laws and living devoutly. Their thinking implied that God was not just, that He was not keeping His promises, and that the wicked were blessed while the righteous

suffered. God considers this a serious offense, viewing their words as "stout against me," coming from pride and contempt. He sees their service as motivated by a selfish desire for earthly profit rather than by love for Him.

You see, the people had a shallow, self-centered view of worship, seeking immediate rewards instead of focusing on God's worth. They were looking for material prosperity as proof of their "doing good," forgetting that God's true rewards are often spiritual. And this is the danger of the so called "health and wealth" gospel, that if I do all the "right" things that I should then expect God to bless me and give me everything I desire. And when things don't turn out they way we want, we blame God and wonder what's happening. And the God calls out the people for this way of thinking.

But then God shifts the focus to a different group of people in vs. 16, a faithful remnant. While many were cynical, some remained faithful. They gathered together, encouraged one another, and their faithfulness did not go unnoticed. God wrote their names in a "book of remembrance." This speaks to the fact that God always has a people who quietly honor Him, even when the surrounding culture is faithless and skeptical.

Discouraged by the sense that it wasn't worth the trouble to serve God, the people of God came together, spoke to one another and encouraged each other in the LORD.

The book of remembrance is a metaphor for the concept of God writing down the words and deeds of those who fear Him and honor His name. It serves as a reminder to us that our acts of faithfulness are not forgotten, and it foreshadows that they will be rewarded, especially when judgment comes. The book signifies that God notices the actions of His faithful followers, and it is a source of comfort and encouragement.

The passage concludes with the ultimate answer to the original question, "Where is the God of justice?" in vs. 17-18.

"They shall be mine," says the LORD, "my treasured possession." In the midst of suffering, overcome by doubt and discouragement, God's people didn't feel like God's jewels. Yet their feeling didn't change the fact, and they needed to let God's fact be greater than their feeling. [back to vs. 6]

But notice, there is a distinction. It may not be perfectly clear today, but a day is coming when the line will be undeniably clear. The righteous will be God's "treasured possession," protected and cherished. The wicked will face His judgment and wrath.

The passage compares God's faithful followers to precious jewels that He will gather and claim as His own. They are a treasure to Him because of their value in His sight. God is describing a future day of judgment where the distinction, God's justice, that the people have been asking for by the way, between the two groups will be undeniable. This will be a time when all will see the difference between those who serve God and those who don't emphasizing that God's care and protection will be evident for those who are His, while the wicked will face His judgment.

The question we must ask ourselves is, "to which to I belong?" Are you part of His family, his treasured possession, through faith in Christ and thus have hope of eternal life and protection from His divine judgment? Or, are you not and because of your rejection of Him and His salvation through Jesus you face His coming justice and wrath? God's offer of forgiveness and salvation through Jesus is available to all to come to Him in faith and repentance.

Our text today provides the answer to our cry for justice in an unjust world. God does not change and He will bring justice. He is coming, not just as a gentle savior, but as a refiner and judge. But we must remember, that His justice begins first, with the purification of his people. He wants to cleanse our hearts, our lives, and our worship. This might feel like a fire, but it's for our good.

He invites us to return to Him in trust. The challenge to honor God with everything we have, including our tithes and offerings, is fundamentally a challenge to trust Him as our source and provider.

Are you tired of the injustice in the world? Trust in the God who does not change. Are you resisting His work of purification in your life? Submit to the Refiner's fire. A day is coming when the distinction between the righteous and the wicked will be clear to all. May we be found in that day as His treasured possession, having trusted, obeyed, and honored His name. Let's pray.

Benediction: "Now to the King eternal, immortal, invisible, the only God, be honor and glory for ever and ever. Amen." – 1 Timothy 1:17