

Messenger!

A Journey Through the Burden of Malachi

Malachi 3:13-18

12- Distinguishing Between the Righteous and the Wicked

November 17, 2019

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13 "Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?'"

14 "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?'"

15 'So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up but they also test God and escape.'"

16 Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name.

17 "They will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare *My* own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

18 So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

To the Glory of God

Periodically I gather Pastors together at my home. And I feed them and give them a gift, usually a book. Rhonda also gives their wives a gift, usually a gift card. And, during the meal, I ask them Questions and try to pick their brains, and explore areas of Theology and Doctrine, as well as practical experiences. And we then pray together, which, to me, is the highlight of the entire gathering.

I absolutely love being in the Ministry. I consider the Call to be in the Ministry to be the greatest Privilege that anyone could ever have.

Now I don't think I am a particularly good Pastor, or even a good Preacher, but to be able to study God's Word and herald it is the highest Honor of my life. My time in the Ministry would be, what I would call, a "fearful Delight". I am *delighted* with Preaching and Teaching, because I honestly love Jesus, and I consider both Preaching and Teaching God's Word to be "Expositional Worship".

But, in that Delight is a very real and a very profound Terror. I am terrified that I might lead someone astray, either by saying what *doesn't* need to be said, or *not* saying what should. I am terrified that my effort to understand God's Word might be wrong, or incomplete, or wayward, and I routinely beg God to help me and to show me Mercy.

So, I spend a great deal of time listening to other men preach. I respect several men, and I listen to their Sermons a lot so I might glean something from them that I lack. So, ultimately, it is the Delight that keeps me going, even when I am faced with discouraging or difficult times. But it is the Terror that keeps me on my knees and that keeps me digging in, and asking Questions, and always trying to do a better job.

My wife and children know that nothing matters to me except that I honestly believe that Jesus is pleased with me. If the Lord is not happy with me, then nothing can make me get over that. And if Jesus is happy with me, nothing can take that away. And we really only have two choices when it comes to making Jesus happy with us:

1. We can comprehend God's Word, rightly and fully, and then go about to obey it.
2. We can guess.

... because in **John 14:15**, Jesus said,

If you love Me, you will keep My commandments.

... so, the correct dynamic is that our Obedience does NOT come first. And every religion or teaching or human philosophy that teaches that our Obedience must come first is a lie, it is a false doctrine, it is evil, and a doctrine of demons. Jesus *infallibly* teaches here that our Obedience is a *response*; it flows out from our Love that we have for Jesus. And the way that the phrase "**you will**" is put in the original

Greek tells me that this Obedience *automatically* flows out from this Love for Jesus. So, *obeying* Jesus is part and parcel to *loving* Jesus. In other words, there is no such thing as “loving” Jesus absent striving to obey Him.

And as we discussed many times, our Obedience is *never* without flaw, so it is never “*perfect* Obedience”. Rather it is an “*Honest* Obedience”, a “*Humble* Obedience”, and an Obedience that acknowledges our weaknesses and rejoices in His Strengths. But, because the Obedience that Jesus talks about here flows out from our Love for Him, this Obedience **MUST** be a “*Glad* Obedience” and a “*Joyful* Obedience”. So, in reality, an “Obedience” that is “forced”, or an “Obedience” that is based in “fear”, is **NOT** really Obedience at all. Unless the “Obedience” that we offer Jesus is based in our Love for Jesus, we may score points with other people, but it certainly isn’t the kind of Obedience that Jesus is talking about here.

And pursuing an “Obedience” that is based in Love *eliminates* things like “human pride” and “arrogance”. But it also *diminishes* things like “will-power” and “human effort”. So, the Obedience that we offer to Jesus cannot ever be a “duty”, and it can never be engaged in as a means of *deserving* or *earning* anything from God. Every Blessing that God gives is based solely in His Mercy, and is determined solely by His Own Divine Prerogative. We can’t ever do anything that will put us in a position where we *deserve* God’s Blessings, and God will never be in a position where He is *obligated* to bless.

And that tells us that the “Obedience” that Jesus is talking about here is **NOT** the *Cause* of our Salvation, but the *fruit* of it. The *Cause* of our Salvation is Love. God’s Love for us. And when God “sets His Love” upon wicked rebels, 100% of them become saved. And everyone who is saved loves God. And everyone who loves God strives to obey Him. And so, another way of looking at Salvation is that it is:

The transformation of our nature (by the Miracle of the New Birth) to the extent that obeying Jesus brings about the fullness of our own Joy

So, as far as I am concerned, “being saved” is all about us *experiencing* the Miracle of the New Birth, and then living our lives *fearlessly*, taking great risks, in this radical Love of the Lord Jesus Christ so that two things happen:

1. God is glorified
2. Our Joy is made full

... and so, the *way* our Joy is made *full* is by God being glorified. Nothing else makes us happier. But God is only glorified when we are made *small*. Every effort to makes us *large* makes God to be *small*. And so, only when we are humbled can God be made large. And not a single lost person would ever want that in a million years. Lost people care *nothing* about God being glorified. Because being lost is *delighting* in robbing God of the Glory (that only belongs to Him), and giving that Glory to ourselves.

So, Salvation is as much about us being humbled as it is about God being glorified. And those two things happen in equal degrees. In other words, no one can be saved unless they are gifted with the ability to honestly agree that there is no "Good", at all, in himself. As long as anyone defends his position, and insists that he is "Good", all on his own, *without* Grace and *without* Salvation, he will never be saved.

So, the ability to desire to live your life "to God's Glory" is the by-product of Salvation. In other words, that's what Salvation does for people. It changes them, *radically, totally*, so that they *honestly* delight to live their lives *with abandon*, so that in all they say, and in all they do, and in all they think, God looks utterly magnificent!

And that tells me that "joyfully obeying Jesus" and "being spiritual" is the same thing. And "joyfully obeying Jesus" and "serving God" is the same thing. And "joyfully obeying Jesus" and "following Jesus" is the same thing. And "joyfully obeying Jesus" and "glorifying God" is the same thing. "Joyfully obeying Jesus and "being a Christian" is the same thing. And "joyfully obeying Jesus" and even "Worship" itself- is the same thing.

So, as I gather those Pastors in my home, I tell them, "*I'm not trying to sell you anything; I don't want you to join any group. I simply want to serve you, and love you, and pray with you, and encourage you.*"

But usually, during the meeting, they begin to loosen up a bit and they begin to relate some of the difficulties and some of the challenges and disappointments that they face as Pastors. And one of the problems that seems to be fairly common, and one that causes them the *greatest* amount of trouble and anguish, is the fact that years before

they were called to be the Pastor of their church, whoever was in charge allowed lost people to become members.

And now, those members are in places of Leadership, and yet they have no desire to be biblical. Obeying Jesus is the farthest thing on their minds. Because they're lost, they don't love Jesus, and so they are *infinitely* more concerned with how many warm bodies are sitting in the pews, and how much money is in the bank, and how nice the Sanctuary is, than they are whether Jesus has the preeminence in all that they say and do, and whether the Church is submitting itself to the Authority of Scripture.

And so, these unsaved members *fight against* the Pastor in his effort to bring the church into alignment with the Word of God. They resist *anything* that they determine (in their own human logic) *might* offend some, or drive them away, even if it is absolutely true to the Bible. And these Pastors have literally broken down at my dinner table and wept over the pain and agony that lost people in positions of Leadership causes them.

Recently, a Pastor told me that 25% of his entire church walked away and started another church *not* over a serious doctrinal Issue, but simply because of a situation that occurred in the nursery.¹

And that is why we go to great lengths in this church to try to make sure that everyone, who is in membership, has truly experienced the Miracle of the New Birth. Now we are not Omniscient, and we cannot see another person's heart. But we look for outward expressions of this burning desire to obey God out of love. The relentless desire to obey that is based in their love for Jesus must be present, way before we allow anyone to become members, or we are making a mistake. And that isn't because we are simply being picky, it is because we take Membership very seriously and we want to try to avoid these problems.

So, wouldn't it be a good idea to devise some way of *eliminating* false converts from ever becoming a member of the Church? Maybe if we had enough Questions that people had to answer, or if we gave everybody a test, we could eliminate allowing people who have not been saved from becoming a member. Yet history teaches that all through the 2,000-year time-frame of the Church, the effort to discern who is truly saved and who isn't has been a struggle. But why?

¹ One of the most common methods that Baptist churches begin in the South is NOT out of a sincere desire to reach a particular area, but simply because they got angry at a situation and left.

One reason is that simply because a person is not always walking in perfect obedience to the Word of God doesn't *necessarily* mean that they are lost. It may simply mean that the cares of life, and the deceitfulness of riches, and the lust of other things have *temporarily* choked the Word of God in their lives. And simply because a person *appears* to be "on fire" for God doesn't *necessarily* mean they are saved. Because we are fallen creatures, we have an enormous capacity to be deceived ourselves, and we are able to deceive others. We must remember that even though he was never saved, *nothing* in Judas Iscariot's life gave any of the other men any reason to doubt him during the entire time he was with Jesus.

Now, personally, I have never understood why anyone would even want to be a member of a church if he wasn't truly saved. If I was lost, I would never darken the door of a church for any reason. I would be out there making as much money as I could, and doing as much as I could to *insulate* myself from the struggles of this life. I go to church because Jesus has given me the privilege of loving Him. And because of what God alone has done in me, I now desire to honor God and live my life to His Glory. But if I was lost, you couldn't pay me enough money to go to church.

But as you read the Bible, you begin to see that the early Church struggled with this Issue, even as we struggle with it today. And all through the history of the Church, the Leaders have tried different methods of weeding out the Tares from the Wheat. But history also teaches us that almost all of those efforts failed miserably. And part of the reason for that failure lies in what Jesus Himself said about the Tares. So, let's go back and find out what the Lord said about both the Tares and the Wheat by looking at **Matthew 13:24-30**:

Jesus presented another parable to them, saying, "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a man who sowed good seed in his field. But while his men were sleeping, his enemy came and sowed tares among the wheat, and went away. But when the wheat sprouted and bore grain, then the tares became evident also. The slaves of the landowner came and said to him, 'Sir, did you not sow good seed in your field? How then does it have tares?' And he said to them, 'An enemy has done this!' The slaves said to him, 'Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?' But he said, 'No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to

grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."

Now this is one of the Parables that Jesus actually explained. So, go down to verses 36-43 to get the explanation:

Then He left the crowds and went into the house. And His disciples came to Him and said, "Explain to us the parable of the tares of the field." And He said, "The one who sows the good seed is the Son of Man, and the field is the world; and *as for* the good seed, these are the sons of the kingdom; and the tares are the sons of the evil *one*; and the enemy who sowed them is the devil, and the harvest is the end of the age; and the reapers are angels. So just as the tares are gathered up and burned with fire, so shall it be at the end of the age. The Son of Man will send forth His angels, and they will gather out of His kingdom all stumbling blocks, and those who commit lawlessness, and will throw them into the furnace of fire; in that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Then *THE RIGHTEOUS WILL SHINE FORTH AS THE SUN*** in the kingdom of their Father. He who has ears, let him hear.**

Now there is a lot to this, but as far as my Sermon this morning look at what the slaves of the landowner asked him in verse 28:

... Do you want us, then, to go and gather them up?...

Do you want us to go and gather up the Tares and *remove* them from the field? In other words, does the Lord desire for the Church to gather up those who *look* like genuine Wheat, but who are NOT genuine Wheat, and remove them from the Church? And look how Jesus responded to that Question:

... No; for while you are gathering up the tares, you may uproot the wheat with them. Allow both to grow together until the harvest; and in the time of the harvest I will say to the reapers, "First gather up the tares and bind them in bundles to burn them up; but gather the wheat into my barn."

... and remember how Jesus identified each part of the Parable:

- ✓ The One Who sows the good seed is the Son of Man

- ✓ The field is the world
- ✓ The good seed... are the sons of the Kingdom
- ✓ The tares are the sons of the evil *one*
- ✓ The enemy who sowed them is the devil
- ✓ The harvest is the end of the age
- ✓ The reapers are angels.

Now the way Jesus speaks here has greatly bothered me for as long as I have been saved. I have fought and agonized over this Parable for many years. Why in the world does the Lord of the Church *not* want us to do something that will, first, *identify* the Tares, and then, *remove* the Tares from His Church? Doesn't Jesus *want* the Tares removed? Why would He say, "*Allow both the Tares and the Wheat to grow together until the End of the Age?*"

And, after nearly fifty years of wrestling with this Parable, I think God has given me a good Answer to those Questions:

False converts help define genuine converts

... those who *act* like they are saved, but who are NOT really saved, help those who truly *are* saved to desire to never be like them. Now, of course, we can never really know a Tare from the Wheat until they either die or God removes them. And that is when we can look back and see that they were Tares all the time. During my almost half a century in the Church, I have seen and read about many, many false converts. And after God removed them, and looking back, *remembering* how they acted, and *remembering* all the complaints they had against the Lord, put a deep desire in me to never act like them and to never talk like them. And reading about how wicked men acted sinfully, as they led the Church in times past, put a desire in me to never be like them. So, I have actually learned how NOT to act, and what NOT to do from the many Tares of Church History. And that knowledge has helped me greatly. Because it is just as important to know what NOT to do as it is to know what TO do. So, had I never seen Tares, I would not have as good an idea what genuine Wheat looks like.

But Jesus was talking about the overall world-wide Church during the entire time that the Church will be on earth. And He was also speaking of His Own capacity for Justice. Even though, many times, it

appears that the wicked prosper, we must take heart in knowing that, at the end, there will be no outstanding accounts. God is Just, and nobody gets away with anything. Every account will be settled, either on the Cross in Salvation or in the lake of fire, as they burn forever, but there will be no outstanding accounts. God is not mocked, whatever a man sows, that shall he also reap.

And that is *exactly* what Malachi was dealing with here in these verses. So, this Passage is intended for two kinds of people:

1. Tares
2. Wheat

And the key verse is verse 18 that says:

So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

... which tells us that we *can* and we *should* have *some* "mechanism" by which we can make the distinction between the person who is Righteous and the person who is Wicked; between the one, who serves God and the one who does NOT serve Him.

But the Sin that Malachi focuses on here is NOT what you might think. What was troubling the people here was what *appeared* to be God NOT judging the Wicked, but rewarding them. It seemed to many in Malachi's day that there was no reason to serve God, and no reason to devote their lives to God, because God was blessing the evildoer while making the life of the genuine follower hard. So, the Issue that was at stake here was whether God was "Just". And many in Malachi's day had judged God to be "Unjust". But what was *really* going on was God was *using* this Issue to distinguish between the Righteous and the Wicked.

So, on the one hand, this Passage is for people who doubt that God is "Just", or who have already made up their minds that He is not, and who scorn the Lord for ignoring their claims. For those people, this Passage is a dire Warning to humble themselves, and to repent, and to stand in awe of God's Freedom to *vindicate* the Righteous when, where, and how He pleases.

But on the other hand, this Passage is also for people who already fear the Lord, and hold His Name in highest esteem, people who *gladly* obey God "as a son serves his Father", even when God *seems* to be *postponing* the settling of accounts. And for those people, this Passage is a Comfort, and an Encouragement to press on in trust, and in joyful Obedience until the Lord comes to vindicate them and their Cause.

And so, those, who can be convicted by the Words of Malachi, those who are willing to be changed when confronted with the horror of their own hearts, they will prove by their conviction and transformation that they are truly Wheat, and that their Conversion experience was genuine. And those, who remain steadfast in their Complaints against God, and who offer reason after reason as to why they do not serve Him with Gladness, those who *refuse* to repent and who are confident in their *own* Goodness, and who insist that God is "Unjust", they are only proving that whatever Salvation experience they think they had was false, and they will be found as Tares. And the Bible says that, at the end of this Age, the angels will come and remove them from God's Kingdom.

So, my prayer this morning, when I got up, and my prayer with the brothers in my room, and my prayer as I began this Sermon, and my prayer as I preach this Message, is that if you belong to the first group, that by the time I am through preaching this you will belong to the second group, because God has worked mightily in your heart. And if you belong to the second group already, my prayer is that your Confidence in the "Justice" and "Care" of God will be made strong for the battles that lay before you this week.

Now verses 13–15 illustrate the kind of people we should NOT be, while verses 16–18 illustrate the kind of people we *should* be. And the Catalyst behind *why* we should be the kind of people in verses 16-18 lie in the four Promises that God gives in this Passage. So, let's look at what we are NOT supposed to be first:

13 "Your words have been arrogant against Me," says the Lord. "Yet you say, 'What have we spoken against You?'"

14 "You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?'"

15 'So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up but they also test God and escape.'"

Here, God has been listening to what these supposedly saved Jews have been saying to each other about Him. It doesn't say they spoke these "arrogant" things directly *to* God. It says they spoke them *about* God. So, they were talking to each other. That's implied in the Hebrew verb, and you can see it in verses 14 and 15 where they talk about "His" rather than "You."

And on the Eve of the national Holiday that we call "Thanksgiving" this is a Warning to all of us. God *despises* complainers. God *hates* ungratefulness, and He is angry with people being unthankful. The wilderness of the Sinai Peninsula is littered with the corpses of tens of thousands of dead Jews who griped and complained and bellyached about God not doing enough for them. The Apostle Paul spoke to this when he said:

Colossians 3:15

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body; and be thankful.

We must understand that all of our Life is a Theater, and we are the actors. Every kitchen, every car, every den, every office, every bedroom, even every bar, is a stage! And God is in the front row of the theater and doesn't miss a single line in the drama of our life, not one! He hears every word that you speak. He even knows the thoughts and intents of your hearts. So, no matter where or when or with whom we speak, God hears our conversations, and He interprets what our conversations imply about Him, perfectly!

In fact, that is all that really matters about our conversations, *what they imply about God*. So, when God listened in on these people in verses 13–15, He heard two things:

- He heard them say that it was pointless to serve God
- He heard them say that it was profitable *not* to

"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?"

Now there are actually two different problems with what they are saying here. One is that these are the words of "lifeless formalism". Because these people were going about in black; fasting and mourning. They were coming to the Temple often with their Sacrifices. They had some of the outward *forms* of Worship down pat. But God was displeased. His Ears were closed, and His Blessings were withdrawn. Why?

Malachi 2:13

This is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts *it with* favor from your hand.

This is what they were complaining about in 3:14, they were mourning, but it was doing no good. Why? One answer was given back in 2:14:

Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

... in other words, the "outward forms" of Worship on the Sabbath by these men, contradicted by their faithlessness to their wives during the week, was *unacceptable* to God. It was nothing but "lifeless formalism". And God will never accept that, even when it is full of emotion and energy. These men were literally weeping at the altar, but God was not moved to pity! Why? Because the "form" of Worship on the Sabbath was replaced by fornication during the week.

And that means that the Test of the Authenticity of our Sunday morning Worship is NOT merely the *intensity* of emotion (as indispensable as that is for genuine Worship), but whether we leave the Church and walk into a life of sinning and compromise during the week.

And that's the first thing wrong with what these people say in verse 14, these are the words of "lifeless formalism". So, they are not nearly as pious as they think they are.

The other thing wrong with these words is that they seem to *assume* that God is obligated to bless the Righteous in some *immediate* and *material* way, or else Righteousness is in vain. In other words, even though they are not truly righteous at all, the way they *think* Righteousness should be rewarded, is skewed. And this is most obvious if we bring verse 15 into the picture.

So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up but they also test God and escape.

So, these supposedly saved Jews are not only saying that it is *pointless* to serve God (v. 14). They are also saying that it is profitable *not* to (v. 15):

So now we call the arrogant blessed; not only are the doers of wickedness built up but they also test God and escape

So, the people who are talking in verses 14 and 15 when they get together in the restaurant to discuss current affairs and religion, they say, *"Even though so and so, never comes to Church, he has a thriving business. And even though so and so, is an atheist, he has never had a sick day in his life. And what about so and so, he took all his profit on Wall Street the day before the crash. And what about the athlete, who oozes arrogance, and yet he makes \$4,000,000 a year and scoffs at God."*

So, these people conclude that the Arrogant are the truly blessed, and the corporate swindlers are the people who know where real prosperity is to be found. And they say, *"It is profitable not to serve God."*

But what's so wrong about this? Not only does experience seem to teach this sort of thing, but didn't the previous Passage set us up for this kind of disillusionment? **Malachi 3:10-12** said that if the people would bring the full Tithe into the storehouse, then God would open Heaven and pour down amazing Blessings. So, isn't the point that if you do what you are supposed to do, you get blessed in this life, and if you don't, you won't? And so, when we look around and see wrongdoers prospering, then shouldn't we conclude that *they* must be the real tithers, the ones God is really pleased with?

And, of course, the Answer is "NO!" Notice from the previous Passage that the *Basis* of Tithing in verse 10 is the personal relationship in verse 7b:

Return to Me, and I will return to you," says the Lord of hosts.

... and Tithing was given as one way this personal "Return" to God takes shape. God never meant that the mere outward form of Tithing would earn His Blessings, any more than going through the motions to sacrifice defective animals and weep would make God hear us.

And, also, the previous Passage teaches that evildoers will NOT prosper. So, God can bring blight to chastise and warn His people of their evil ways. But this does not mean that Blight is what *always* comes upon Disobedience.

And the third thing to notice is that even though God promises great Blessings to those whose heart leads toward Tithing and beyond (cheerful Giving), God never ties Himself down to any definite *time frame* for His Blessings, nor to any definite *proportion* of material Goods.

The Essence of the Promise is that when you become a Giver, based on a transformed heart, when you begin to obey, based in your love for God (which was a gift from God), God will always make a way to provide for you. And God will make a way for you to continue to love and serve and give

But you can't start analyzing God's Promise to devise some "formula" that allows you to always come out on top in this life. That is *abusing* the Promise and *presuming* on the Mercy of God. And this is why the Apostle Paul could say:

Philippians 4:11b-13

... I have learned to be content in whatever circumstances I am. I know how to get along with humble means, and I also know how to live in prosperity; in any and every circumstance I have learned the secret of being filled and going hungry, both of having abundance and suffering need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.

Paul was not ignorant of the Promises of God. And neither had Paul lost his faith. What Paul rejoiced over is *exactly* what many in the modern church actually pray against, and work hard to never possess:

The Gift of Contentment in the midst of Hardship
is a Blessing to be earnestly desired and highly cherished

... so, Paul had been made willing to leave to God the *timing* and the *proportion* of any of God's Blessings.

So, that is the second problem with what these people in verses 14 and 15 are saying. The first problem was that they thought they were Righteous just because of certain religious forms they practiced. The second problem is that they read that same formalism into God. And their conclusion was that God's Blessings must be "material" and they must be "now", otherwise, God was not worth serving. And that is the kind of people we are NOT supposed to be.

The second half of this Passage tells us what kind of people we are *supposed* to be, and it gives four Promises to encourage us in this way. And what we are supposed to be is described in three ways:

1. Fear the Lord

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name.

We are to "fear the Lord". And to "fear the Lord" is to tremble at the thought of offending Him by unbelief and disobedience. It is the sense that we get from both His Word and through personal Experience that God is *not* to be trifled with. It is the very opposite of the Attitude of the people in verses 13–15 who speak with an incredible swagger: "*It doesn't pay to serve God.*"

Those who fear God shudder at the thought of speaking that way about their majestic Father. Anything that dishonors God is anathema to those who fear God.

2. Esteeming, Honoring, Regarding

a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name.

We are to esteem or honor or regard God's Name, or God's Reputation, or the Issues that define Who God is. This is what we are supposed to pray for when we say:

"Hallowed be Your Name"

We are to be the kind of people who hold the Name of God in such high regard that we would not presume to trot our little notions against His infinite Wisdom. The thought of standing in Judgment over God's timing, or His Method of dispensing His Blessings, is *unthinkable* to those who hallow His Name.

3. Serving

"They will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare *My own possession*, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

We are to be the kind of people who serve God in the same way that a good Son serves the Father he loves. Now contrast verse 14 with this Promise.

"You have said, 'It is vain to serve God; and what profit is it that we have kept His charge, and that we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?"

So, verse 14 says it is *pointless* to serve God. But verse 17 says that God will count them His Own Possession and spare them who serve Him. What is the difference?

It is the difference between the Service of a Son who belongs to his Father, and the Service of a Slave who has no relationship to the Father. It's the difference between the younger brother and the elder brother in the parable of the Prodigal Son. The younger brother, broken and humbled, wanted to serve because he knew that to be at home with the Father was the greatest Blessing in the world. To be in good Grace with the Father was worth more than all the pleasures this world could offer. The elder brother had the mindset of a slave: *"If anybody around*

here deserves a party, I do. I have worked harder than anybody else to earn and deserve my Father's Blessing!"

There is a formal, slavish, "Service" of God that thinks in terms of what I am contributing to the Plantation, and what the slave owner owes me. That kinds of "Service" is indeed in vain. But there is another kind of "Service" that thinks like a Son in the house of his Father: *"My Father is wonderful, and I desire to be with him! And with him is total security, with him is food on the table, with him is peaceful rest and love and the Glory of my Father! Why would I want to work anywhere else but here!"* That is the mindset of a true born-again child of God.

But what about the problem of "Justice", the fact that evildoers prosper in this life, and those who fear God are not rewarded for the Good they do? The Answer is that those who fear God, and hallow His Name, and serve Him as their Father, believe the four Promises of verses 16–18: That God will act to vindicate them and to distinguish Right from Wrong in His time, at some point in the future. So, let me just mention the four Promises.

1. God Will Hear Those Who Fear Him

God will hearken and hear the good things that those who fear God say to each other for the glory of God and the good of man. Verse 16:

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord gave attention and heard *it*,

In other words, God not only overhears the foolish and arrogant talk of the evildoers, He also hears every good word you have ever spoken and ever will speak. And God promises that not one tiny word of Goodness will fall to the ground without God's notice. God is Just!

2. God Will Remember Those Who Fear Him

God will not only hear them, he will remember them. Verse 16 goes on to say:

... the Lord gave attention and heard *it*, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who esteem His name.

And this means that God will never forget the Good that we have done through His Power and for His Glory. It may look forgotten and unrewarded now. But God is not Unjust (**Hebrews 6:10**), and so, every Sermon and Bible Study faithfully prepared, every courtesy on the highway, every smile on the street, every thank you note you ever wrote, every "*I'm sorry. Will you forgive me?*", every fragment of Grace in your life is being written in the Book of Remembrance and will redound to your Joy and God's Glory forever when the Books are opened. I tell you, God is Just!

3. God Will Spare Those Who Fear Him

God will spare those who fear him and live for his glory as a father spares a son who serves him. Verse 17:

"They [i.e., those who fear and honor God] will be Mine," says the Lord of hosts, "on the day that I prepare *My* own possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him."

The good news here is that sons don't have to be perfect to be spared; they just have to serve like sons instead of slaves. They have to *enjoy* the castle instead of hankering for the bawdy barracks where the slaves live.

Here's where Jesus comes in. How can a holy God spare a sinful son even if the son has repented and come home? The answer: Jesus Christ came into the world to save sinners (**1Timothy 1:15**). God is Just. He will spare sinful sons, precisely because He did not spare His only sinless Son.

4. The Righteous and Unrighteous Will Be Distinguished

Finally, God promises that all ambiguity between the righteous and the wicked will one day be cleared up. The future judgment holds the key. Verse 18:

So you will again distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him.

And so, I close where I began. Which group are you in? Are you among those who hold back from radical following of Jesus, because of suspicion or doubt or even anger? If so, consider the Promises of God this morning. God is Just. He will vindicate His people. All wrongs will be righted. And if you come to Him in humble Repentance and Faith, he will spare you as a Father spares his own son.

Amen. Let's pray.

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The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with your spirit. Amen. Be watchful and quicken your pace. Soli Deo Gloria. For the Glory of God alone.