

Epworth Chapel on the Green
November 13, 2016
Pentecost 26
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Malachi 3:13-4:6
Psalm 98:5-10
2 Thessalonians 3:6-13
Luke 21:5-19

The people addressed by the prophet Malachi in today's Old Testament lesson are plagued by a question that burrows deep into their souls. It is a question that has grown larger in its focus because of their observation and life experience. For them, it has become a preeminent question because of the raw realities of life and the bleak prospects of their present circumstances.

The question which they ask is simply this: Does it pay to serve God?

And at the surface level, their answer seems to be "no" it does not. Their observed experience prompts them to say that "Those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them go free of harm" (v. 15).

What good does it do to live faithfully, to play by the rules, when you see others around you who clearly do not play by the rules, and who seem to flaunt those rules with impunity?

The persons to whom Malachi writes never met the legendary baseball star Casey Stengel, but they might have readily agreed with his old saw when he said, "Nice guys finish last."

And so they ask: Does it pay to serve the Lord? Is it worth it?

Perhaps you have never needed to ask this question in your life, or wanted to. But if you are like me, this question has at some point been in your heart -- if not on your lips. And it deserves to be answered.

I remember when I was a sophomore in high school. My Spanish teacher, Mr. Coburn, was a nice fellow. But he was not strong on discipline, and was often unaware of what the kids in his class were doing.

When it came time for quarter or semester exams, a few of us in the class would try to study to prepare for the tests. But many in our circle of friends would get together and devise a way to cheat, and they were successful at it because Mr. Coburn was oblivious to what they were doing. It became so easy for these students that they became very blatant about what they were doing. Everyone in the class *but* Mr. Coburn knew what was happening.

I was a fairly new Christian at the time. And I remember asking myself, “Lord, what’s the use of trying to do the right thing? My friends are sitting here cheating and bragging about it, and they’re not getting caught.”

As I grew older, things didn’t change much. But as I prepared to enter the ministry I thought to myself, “OK, I’m working in the church now, so things will be different.”

And then I saw colleagues doing things that left me going back to my study, closing the door, and scratching my head in bewilderment. One day I called my

brother Rod, also a minister, to complain and to seek his comfort. I said, “Rod, this is the church, and stuff like this ought not to happen!”

His response to me was: “Grow up!”

When I complained to Connie, who was working in the business world, I got no comfort there either.

Connie was working in situations (like some of you) where persons were climbing the corporate ladder, and they would step on anyone and everyone to do it. She knew people who had thrown integrity and fair play completely out the window.

And you know, or have met, persons like this too. If you live long enough in this world, you will be able to say with the psalmist David, “Look how the wicked prosper!”

If you live long enough, you will see or observe wicked and irreverent people who violate laws -- whether they be civil laws, God’s laws, or both -- and appear to get away with it. And in a more cynical moment you might be tempted to ask: “What’s the use? Does it really pay to serve the Lord?”

One pastor asked himself this question, and answered this way:

I used to think that the wicked seem to have things much better than the righteous, that the righteous always seem to get the short end of the stick. But that is a very human view, a view from my selfish perspective. What we all have to understand is that God’s love for us is not demonstrated by our circumstances, but by our destiny. God is at work in our lives -- not to make things easy for us, but to make us

men and women in the full sense of the word, to enable us to grow to maturity. Circumstances may be grim indeed, but we do not look at the circumstances and say, "God doesn't love us." We look at the purpose God has in mind. It is our destiny, our ultimate destination, that demonstrates the love of God in our lives.

This pastor had touched the truth. So have the writers of our scripture lessons today. Malachi and Luke both remind us that when it comes to the question of whether or not it pays to serve the Lord, the question must be asked with reference not only to what is happening *around* us, but what God is doing *in* us.

We must ask that question not only with respect to the paths we take, but with attention to *where* those paths ultimately take us.

Hymn writer Katharina von Schlegel captured this in her beautiful hymn, "Be Still My Soul." She writes:

*Be still, my soul, the Lord is on thy side.
Bear patiently the cross of grief or pain.
Leave to thy God to order and provide;
In every change He faithful will remain.
Be still, my soul; thy best, thy heavenly Friend
Thro' thorny ways leads to a joyful end.* [Katharina von Schlegel, 1752]

Both Malachi and Luke would agree with this truth.

Let me admonish you this morning, especially those of you who may be navigating rough waters in your life right now: When you look at your life and your circumstances, don't confuse what is going on with what is REALLY going on.

That is, don't look merely at your *immediate* circumstances. Look beneath them to see how God is at work to fulfill his purposes for your life. Look behind what is going on to what is REALLY going on. Look to *where* God is taking you and *what* God is making of you. Look past your circumstances to your *destiny*.

And what is your destiny? Your destiny is to be a calf! Listen to Malachi: "But for you who fear my name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in his wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture" (4:2).

As you come to the Lord's Table this morning, you are coming to the Christ who not only helps you in your immediate circumstances, but who also shapes your destiny and who is fulfilling his ultimate purpose for you. Let that assurance fill your heart with joy, and welcome with joy the grace he offers this morning.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.