

Themes in Malachi - Lesson 5

RESPECTING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG

Introduction

- A. Text: **Mal. 3:13-18**.
- B. The people to whom Malachi prophesied held some *very confused notions about right and wrong*.
- C. This mixed-up thinking about good and evil was *yet another symptom* of their underlying sin of *irreverence* toward God.
- D. None of the forms of irreverence confronted by Malachi are more *prevalent in our own age* than this.

I. THE PROBLEM

- A. It is an *ominous sign* when God points out sin in the lives of His people and has to say, "Is it not evil?" (**Mal. 1:8**) — as if His people did not have sufficient powers of moral discernment to see the *obvious*.
- B. The prophet accused them of having "weari[ed] the Lord" with their words - **Mal. 2:17**.
 - 1. They had said, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them" (**Mal. 2:17**) — as if God's treatment of the wicked (perhaps the nations around Israel) was better than His treatment of the righteous.
 - 2. They had asked, "Where is the God of justice?" (**Mal. 2:17**) — as if God was not acting fairly.
- C. The Lord charged them with having used "harsh" words against Him - **Mal. 3:13**.
 - 1. They had said, "It is vain to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts?" (**Mal. 3:14**) — as if their personal service to God had gotten them nothing. Cf. **Job 21:14,15**.
 - 2. They had concluded, "So now we call the proud blessed, for those who do wickedness are raised up; yes, those who tempt God go free" (**Mal. 3:15**) — as if it would actually be wiser to be wicked.
- D. Yet, the Lord anticipated a coming day: "Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him" (**Mal. 3:18**).
 - 1. Among the Jews at the end of the OT, there was a disregard of the difference between the righteous and the wicked — a denial that it made any difference to be one or the other.
 - 2. But in the day of the Messiah, the coming "Messenger of the covenant" (**Mal. 3:1**), the Lord's faithful people would again make this distinction.

II. DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE PROBLEM

- A. Denial that there is any *objective or fixed standard* of right and wrong. Moral relativity.
- B. Denial that there is any *difference* between right and wrong.
 - 1. The "monistic" worldview is gaining popularity in our culture.
 - 2. Monism holds that all reality is one — differences (even between good and evil) are only illusory.
- C. *Perversion* of moral differences.

1. Willful substitution of wrong for right, turning moral values upside-down - **Isa. 5:20**.
 2. One cannot help but think of the modern acceptance of abortion, homosexuality, obscenity, etc.
- D. *Double standards*. Failure to identify our own evil, the tendency to make exceptions for ourselves.
- E. *Resentment* that those who do not even try to do right sometimes seem to have it better than those who do - **Mal. 2:17**. Cf. **Psa. 73:1-28**.
- F. Doubt that God will punish evil and reward righteousness - **Mal. 3:14,15**. Cf. **Zeph. 1:12**; **Gal. 6:7-9**.
1. It has always been tempting to be cynical about rewards and punishments, to give in to the view that it does not make any real difference whether one tries to do right or not. Cf. **Job 2:9**.
 2. But faith requires us to believe that God does reward obedience, that He does treat the righteous different than the unrighteous - **Hb. 11:6**. Cf. **Gal. 6:7-9**.
- G. Failure to distinguish between righteous and wicked *people* - **Mal. 3:18**. Cf. **Psa. 15:4**.
- H. *Poor powers of moral discrimination*. Ignorance, inability/unwillingness to discern right from wrong, hardened conscience, etc. Cf. **Eph. 4:17-19**.

III. REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

- A. One reason we fail to adequately respect the difference between right and wrong is that *so much of our thinking is short-term thinking*.
1. Our assessment of whether it does any good to do good often disregards the *future judgment of God*. Cf. **1 Cor. 15:19**.
 2. We don't even take a very long view of causes and consequences in *this life*. Cf. **1 Tim. 4:8**.
 3. We make up our minds about the story on the basis of the first few chapters, not the entire book!
- B. But another reason for the problem is that some of the time we simply *have not obeyed God consistently enough* to experience "the difference that it makes to make a difference" between right and wrong — we have not really tried Christianity!
1. Often it does not appear to us that it does any good to distinguish between right and wrong because we have never really done that and lived consistently on the basis of that distinction.
 2. We merely dabble with righteousness and then wonder why there were so few "benefits" — we discard God's standards after no more than a half-hearted trial at using them.
 3. "Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried" (G. K. Chesterton).
 4. Through Malachi, God challenged His people to "prove" Him, to put Him to the test and actually see, in the course of real obedience, if it does not make a difference to do right - **Mal. 3:10**.

IV. THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

- A. To say (or act like) right and wrong do not matter is to make *an accusation against God* - **Mal. 3:13**.
1. It implies that God is not telling the truth when He says that *right and wrong matter*. Cf. **Gen. 3:1**.
 2. It implies that God will not do as He says about *rewarding right and punishing wrong* - **Gal. 6:7**.
- B. One of the horrible things about the failure to deal honestly with right and wrong is that, uncorrected, *the problem grows worse and worse* — to the point where we become *virtually blind and incapable of seeing the difference* - **Rom. 1:21-32**; **2 Thess. 2:9-12**; **2 Tim. 3:13**.
- C. The human *ability to make moral discriminations* is a high gift, one to be *guarded and cultivated*.

1. When we use our ability to make judgments, we are commanded to “judge with righteous judgment” (**Jn. 7:24**) — that means seeing things as they really are, recognizing distinctions that actually exist, not the least of which are those between right and wrong.
 2. It is a very serious charge to be described as “judges with evil thoughts” (**Jas. 2:4**).
- D. Ultimately, we will properly respect what God says about right and wrong when we properly respect *Him* - **Mal. 1:6; 3:16-18**.

Conclusion

- A. There IS a radical difference between right and wrong, good and evil.
- B. This distinction is inherent in the character of God, the Creator of the reality that we are a part of.
- C. We live life at its best when we reverently *honor the rules of reality* — and God their Source.
- D. God will be true to the principles of His own character — and He will reward us when we do so.
- E. “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely He is God who judges in the earth” (**Psa. 58:11**).