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Giving God Our Best

Malachi 1:6-14, 3:6-12

Douglas Scalise, Brewster Baptist Church

The Old Testament is a redemptive history that lays the foundation upon which the New Testament is built. In the first five books known as the Torah or Law, God is affirmed as the Creator, and Israel was chosen, delivered, disciplined, and taught. The remaining historical books follow the conquest of the land, the period of the judges, the formation of a united kingdom, and the division of that kingdom into the North (Israel) and the South (Judah). Each kingdom was invaded and conquered, but a remnant of the people eventually returned.

Poetical books such as Job, Psalms, and Proverbs focus on a right relationship with God as the basis for a life of meaning, significance, and beauty. Finally, the seventeen books of the Prophets have a message of judgment and condemnation because of the people's injustice, idolatry, and complacency; however, the prophets also bring a word of consolation, comfort, and future hope that the Lord has not abandoned the people and that God's love is steadfast.

All the prophets implore the people to **take God seriously and give God their best**. Regardless of the people's disobedience and lack of faith, God remains faithful, stable, and constant. That is why the Lord says through the prophet in Malachi 3:6-12, "**For I the Lord do not change**; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished. Ever since the days of your ancestors you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. **Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts**. But you say, *"How shall we return?"*

Will anyone rob God? Yet you are robbing me!

But you say, *"How are we robbing you?"* In your tithes and offerings!

You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me—the whole nation of you! Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house, and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts; see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.

I will rebuke the locust for you, so that it will not destroy the produce of your soil; and your vine in the field shall not be barren, says the Lord of hosts.

Then all nations will count you happy, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts." Malachi 3:6-12

Change is a part of life. Change can be stimulating and exciting. Change can also be frightening and disturbing and as unstoppable as the aging process. A Grandpa

and granddaughter were sitting talking when she asked, *"Did God make you, Grandpa?"*
"Yes, God made me," the grandfather answered.

A few minutes later, the little girl asked him, *"Did God make me too?"*

"Yes, He did," the older man answered. For a few minutes, the little girl seemed to be studying her grandpa, as well as her own reflection in the mirror, while her grandfather wondered what was running through her mind. At last she spoke.

"You know, Grandpa, God's doing a lot better job lately."

In the midst of all the changes we experience, we can be grateful for the stability that comes from this truth – **the Lord does not change**. Malachi 3:6 says, **"For I the Lord do not change."**

It is appropriate that Malachi, the final book in the Christian Old Testament, summarizes **6 things about the Lord that don't change**. We have heard these six characteristics throughout the Old Testament and in the prophets in particular. The first is revealed in the second verse of Malachi.

God's Love Doesn't Change 1:2, "I have loved you, says the Lord."

The people respond to God's declaration of love with the question, *"How have you loved us?"* God has chosen Israel to be the instrument of blessing to the world, but the adversity and suffering they faced at the hands of Babylonians and Edomites caused them to doubt God's love for them. When things don't go the way we want, hope, or desire, we may question the love of God. If God exists and loves me then why am I going through this hardship? If God loves me, why doesn't the Lord do something about my situation? What we believe matters and we believe God's love doesn't change. As followers of Jesus we believe that God so loved the world that He gave his only begotten Son so that whoever believes in him should not perish but have everlasting life (John 3:16). The fact that God loves us; however, doesn't mean we are going to be spared heartache, pain, or suffering. In truth, the more we love, the more we open our heart to the Lord and to other people and their needs and their suffering - the more heartache or pain we may experience. No one experiences more heartache or pain than the Lord who deals with more rejection and disappointment than any person can imagine.

"I have loved you," the Lord says, and the Lord wants us to love our Creator and our sisters and brothers in return. This is a message that carries through the whole Bible. The **second thing** we learn in Malachi is that

God's Glory Doesn't Change 1:6-2:2 "take it to heart, to give glory to My name,"
Says the Lord of hosts," (2:2 NKJV). Malachi conveys the Lord's condemnation of the

priests for corrupting worship and misleading the people. How were they corrupting worship and misleading the people? By allowing the people to offer God their leftovers rather than their first fruits, by permitting them to give blemished, blind, dying or even captured animals for their sacrifices rather than the best of their own flocks and herds. According to Leviticus 22, the people and priests were to bring only pure and unblemished animals to sacrifice. An old sheep staggering around on its last legs was not exactly what the Lord, “a great king,” expects or deserves. Much like the old comedian Rodney Dangerfield, the Lord complains about not getting any respect. The Lord says, “You wouldn’t give such a pathetic gift to your governor, he’d throw you out of his presence, why would you think it is acceptable to me?” The Lord is so upset by this lack of respect that God wishes the temple doors were shut and this half-hearted, complacent, mediocre, weak worship would cease. Earlier in the Old Testament the Lord said, “*Those who honor me, I will honor.*” Those who don’t honor and glorify God, who don’t fulfill the very first of the Ten Commandments, shouldn’t expect a whole lot of favor from God in return.

God wants our first fruits, not our leftovers because God’s glory and honor deserve the very best we can give. God is not just concerned with *what* we do but *how* we do it. An amazing thing about the Lord is that even when we don’t return God’s love, even when our worship becomes an empty ritual, our giving a matter of personal convenience rather than a sacrifice worthy of the Creator of the universe, **3. God’s Faithfulness Doesn’t Change 2:10** (NLT), “*Are we not all children of the same Father? Are we not all created by the same God? Then why are we faithless to each other, violating the covenant of our ancestors?*” “***Do not be faithless***” (2:16). The particular form of faithfulness that God is addressing in Malachi 2 is that some men in Israel are divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying pagan women. God is faithful to the covenant established with Israel and the Lord expects people to be faithful to the covenants they make as well. I recognize that dozens of women and men here today have experienced divorce and that each person who gets divorced has his or her reasons. I am not judging the decisions that you have made. But we cannot avoid the stark statement in Malachi 2:16, God hates divorce. God hates it because as those who have endured it can attest, it is painful for everyone involved and it means the breaking of a covenant that was made between a man and a woman before God. In a larger sense, faithfulness is a key attribute of God and a key virtue in God’s people. Our faithful God expects us to be faithful.

Next, the prophet says that **4. God's Justice Doesn't Change** (2:17-3:5). "Where is the God of justice?" the people ask, feeling that they are not seeing justice. I can relate to that lament. I look around the country and our world and I wonder where is the God of justice? I also am sure that the Lord is looking at people and crying right back at us – "Where are the people of justice?"

The Lord promises that a messenger will come with a word that will be as hot and uncomfortable as a refiner's fire. Specifically the Lord's justice will be revealed to "sorcerers, adulterers, liars, those who oppress workers in their wages or take advantage of widows, orphans, and those who thrust aside the alien and do not fear the Lord" (3:5). In the Gospels we learn that John the Baptist was seen as the fulfillment of this prophecy as he preached a message of repentance from sin to prepare the way for the coming of the Messiah, Jesus. If we have heard and learned anything in the prophets it is that the Lord is a God of justice and we want to do everything we can to make sure we are just and that we do justice. God's justice, faithfulness, glory and love are unchanged.

5. God's Mercy Doesn't Change (3:6), "***For I the Lord do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, have not perished.***" The Lord had spared the people judgment and death regardless of their sins and failures and they had responded to God's generous mercy by blatantly robbing the Lord by not giving the full tithe or the first ten percent of their income back to God, this was seen in the Old Testament as the minimal amount. When we give it is our way of acknowledging that God is the owner and we are merely the stewards or managers of stuff that belongs to God. Failing to tithe was failing to affirm that God is the owner of everything. God says the people are cursed and won't be blessed as long as their priorities are out of whack in regard to their giving. Even in the New Testament we are taught to give proportionately as God has blessed us and we are to do so with a joyful, cheerful heart. People can give for the wrong reasons.

I read about a dry cleaner who very generously gives each customer a free copy of the daily newspaper. As a woman took her copy, she told him, "*I hope the business grows enough to offset the cost of the papers.*"

"*Oh, don't worry about us,*" he said. "*Nothing dirties clothes more than newsprint.*" Our giving is not to be for selfish reasons but as an expression of our appreciation for the Lord's mercy upon us and faithfulness to us.

As we close the Old Testament, we conclude with a final statement that

God's Purpose Doesn't Change (4:2) *"But for you who revere my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings."* God's ultimate purpose will be revealed in Jesus. In Jesus we see the love, glory, faithfulness, justice, mercy, and purpose of God revealed in all their fullness and beauty. That is why the Christmas Carol, Hark the Herald Angels Sing, uses that image to describe Jesus. In Jesus, God gave the very best gift possible to us – forgiveness, purpose, meaning, and power for living a joyful, abundant, eternal life.

God deserves our best, not the least we can get by with or a mediocre effort.

When we come to worship a Loving and Glorious God, a faithful God of justice and mercy, whose purpose is to give us life and well being, Malachi says we are to do so with hearts full of love and gratitude. We are to come focused on glorifying the Lord.

There is an old Irish story about a woman who had the reputation of being very holy because she never missed a worship service. She not only attended worship on Sunday morning, but also every midweek service or study and every special service as well.

One day a friend said to her, "How many times a year do you attend worship? I would think the number would be close to one hundred." Intrigued by the question, the woman decided to keep track. She built a wooden box, locked it, and hid the key where no one else could find it. Each time she returned home from worship, she placed a pebble in the box. Whenever she came home from church, she never forgot to put a pebble in the box.

As the years passed, the woman began to wonder if the box was getting too heavy to lift. She asked a strong man who lived in her town to help her carry the box outside. "Be careful," she said, "It is very heavy."

The strong man picked the box up effortlessly and said, "Your box is very light. I don't think you'll need my help in moving it."

Quickly the woman found the key and opened the box. She looked inside and found only five stones. She stood speechless, gazing into the almost empty box. After some time, the woman walked to church and told her pastor the story. "It doesn't seem possible that someone has stolen the pebbles out of my box. It was locked, secured, and the key was hidden."

The wise pastor spoke kindly to the woman, "Your box tells us that when you attended worship, God has not been first in your mind and your neighbors have not been central in your prayers. It is clear most of the time you were thinking about yourself,

about how pious and holy you were, and how everyone ought to know how devoted you have been to church. This is a sign from heaven that only five times have you entered worship with a heart fully turned to God. True worship does not consist so much in how many times we come to a building, but the spirit in which we worship.”¹

We are to take God seriously. A boss said to an employee at his retirement party: *"As a symbol of our gratitude, we have created this special gold watch to serve as a reminder of your many years with the company. It needs a lot of winding up, is always a little late, and every day at quarter to five, it stops working."* God deserves our best.

¹ Stories for the Gathering, William R. White, (Augsburg Press, Minneapolis, 1977), 132-133.