

THE GOD WHO DRAWS ME AWAY FROM MYSELF

SERIES: MALACHI



Catalog No. 111211
Malachi 2:17-3:15
3rd Message
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December 11, 2011

Last week we talked about dogs. We learned that none of the dogs at PBC have a hard time loving their owners. I thought it was only fair that we balance things out this week and talk about cats. Who here is a cat owner? Cats are a good introduction for us this morning because we are talking about being obsessed with ourselves. I found this comic which pretty much sums up how cats think of themselves.

It's a *Garfield* comic by Jim Davis. Jon (the owner of Garfield, the cat) says to Garfield as he's filing his nails, "Garfield, of all the species on earth, cats are the most self-centered!" The next scene shows Garfield shocked and frozen, no longer filing his nails, as he absorbs Jon's statement. The third scene shows Garfield looking at Jon with a superior expression on his face saying, "There are other species?"

Last week I asked the dog owners whether your dogs have a hard time loving you. I won't ask our cat owners that. It's just not fair.

The truth is that we are all similar to cats. When we get down to it, most of us have a hard time realizing that there are other people out there. Our experience is so defined by our own experience that sometimes it's hard to get outside of ourselves. In a lot of ways, we are all addicted to ourselves. We are fascinated by our ups and downs and consumed by whatever needs, wants, hurts, or joys we are in the middle of right now.

Today we are in the third week of an Advent series going through the book of Malachi. These are the last words recorded in the Bible before the coming of Christ and they are a powerful message to God's people about what it means to relate to him. The first week we looked at the simple but profound affirmation that God loves us. Last week we started trying to figure out how on earth we can enter into that love. We saw two different ways that God draws us to himself—to help us receive his love.

This week we're going to look at three more things that keep us from entering into God's love. But they all have to do with the same basic issue. Our obsession with ourselves. Looking out for number one. Being so concerned with my needs and my experience that relating to another person, much less relating to God is

really tricky. If we're going to enter into a relationship with God, he needs to draw us to himself. That's what we saw last week and now we also need help giving up on what is our most basic addiction: ourselves. We need someone to help us leave behind the desperate need to protect ourselves. We need a God who draws us away from ourselves.

This is the question that Malachi deals with in the passage we will be looking at today. Can we really trust God enough to stop protecting ourselves? As we've been working through the book of Malachi, we've noticed that it contains six arguments between God and his people. The book is basically a summary of these fights. This week, we're looking at three distinct arguments that God and his people are having. But they all center around the same issue. It's all about God asking his people to let go of their need to take care of themselves. God is asking them to murder selfishness. Kill the notion that you are at the center of the universe.

So this week, we're looking at Malachi 2:17-3:15. It's a story of a people who are desperate to maintain control over their lives. We'll see them arguing with God about whether other people have it better than them. We'll see them argue with God over how they use money and whether this whole life of faith is worth it. We'll also see God's consistent encouragement to them. I will take care of you. I'll help you come away from yourself. This is the message that God gives his people.

Let Go Of Fairness

We'll start by looking at the first argument that Malachi records between God and his people. As we've seen regularly throughout Malachi, God will say something, and then he will refer to how his people answer him.

Malachi 2:17:

¹⁷You have wearied the LORD with your words.

"How have we wearied him?" you ask.

By saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and he is pleased with

them” or “Where is the God of justice?”

God starts off by saying, “I’m tired of listening to you. All you do is say the same thing over and over again. You just don’t get it.” His people come back and say, “What are you talking about? What did we do? What are you tired of hearing?” So God quotes them. He says that they are complaining because the bad guys are winning. They think God has gone missing because people are doing evil and nothing is done about it. They conclude that either God is pleased with them or he is missing.

We are born with an innate sense of justice. If you don’t believe me, then try this experiment. Go into a kindergarten class room. Have the kids sit down quietly. Tell them that anyone who makes a noise is going straight to time out. Wait until one of them makes a noise. It should take about three seconds. Put that kid in timeout. Wait for another kid to make a noise. That should take three and a half seconds. Give him a cookie. Then run. Because you will have a class of kindergartners ready to attack you. They will be furious at your display of justice.

You will not have done much to help the teacher of that classroom maintain order, but you will have taught those kindergartners a very important lesson about the way our world works. Some people break the rules and get sent to timeout. Other people break the rules and get cookies. It isn’t how it is supposed to be, but it’s how it is. This is true in our world that bad people sometimes get away with it. You might even say they often get away with it.

This was as obvious to the ancient Israelites as it would be to that class of kindergartners. So they complained about it. In Jeremiah 12:1, the prophet asks, “Why does the way of the wicked prosper? Why do all the faithless live at ease?” In Job 12:6, Job observes, “The tents of marauders are undisturbed, and those who provoke God are secure.” In Psalm 73:3, the poet confesses, “I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.” No matter where you look, you see bad people getting away with it.

When we are honest with ourselves, it isn’t so much that our sense of justice has been violated. Most of us aren’t that noble. Mostly, we’re just upset that someone else got away with something that we wish we could have gotten away with. When we see the wicked prosper, what makes us mad is not so much the violation of justice, but the fact that others are getting what we want. Jeremiah was upset because he wanted to live at ease, but didn’t. Job was mad because everything

was taken away from him, but not other people. The psalmist was the most honest of the bunch. He said he envied the arrogant because he wanted what they had.

So God responded to his people’s complaint. They said they wanted justice. So he says, “Don’t worry, I’ll bring justice. But you may not like it when it comes.”

Malachi 3:1-5:

¹“See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come,” says the LORD Almighty.

²But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. ³He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, ⁴and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years.

⁵“So I will come near to you for judgment. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive aliens of justice, but do not fear me,” says the LORD Almighty.

God says that if you want to see the God of justice, don’t worry. He’s coming. He talks about sending his messenger who will prepare the way. The word for “my messenger” in Hebrew is Malachi. This book is in a sense God’s messenger, preparing the way for another messenger, the messenger of the covenant to come. That’s why we are looking at this book during Advent. We are in a season of celebrating the coming of Christ. This book prepares us for that.

But the real question for God’s people in Malachi and the question for us as well is whether we really want God to bring justice. We say that things are unfair. We say that we want everything to be fair. But do we really want that? Malachi asks, “Who can endure the day of his coming?” Do we really want him to come?

I hear the phrase “that’s not fair” a lot from my children. They clearly have a passion to see justice on the earth. So sometimes when one of them is in trouble, I’ll remind them that they are usually so concerned with

justice. If they really want things to be fair, it wouldn't be fair for them to not get punished. But somehow in those moments, their passion for justice isn't quite as strong.

The same is true for most of us. Maybe when we talk about fairness, it's more about us than a real sense of justice in the world. Maybe we are more concerned with other people getting more than they deserve than us really getting what we deserve. Maybe fairness is a dressed up way to talk about our obsession with ourselves. But God is helping us break that addiction. We say that we want fairness. God says he'll bring justice. So the first challenge for us is to let go of our demand for fairness and wait for God to bring justice.

Let Go Of Fairness.

Honestly, I don't know how people get by in this world without believing that God will eventually bring justice. How do you function apart from that belief? Two young men from our congregation recently were struck by a car in a hit and run accident. They are now responsible for large medical bills and there is very little chance that the driver will be found. Things like this should not happen. How do you live in a world where things like that happen without believing that God will eventually set things right.

We need to trust God to bring justice. There is no other way to live. We think that we have to demand that everything be fair. We have to hold on to our sense of who deserves what. We need to make sure that nobody gets more than they deserve, but living that way is a dead-end. Apart from God, you'll either go crazy with the unfairness of this world or you'll become a vigilante. You'll always complain about what everyone else is receiving, desperate to see your version of fairness applied to the world. Bitter when it isn't.

Go crazy, make everything fair, or let go of fairness. Let God draw you away from yourself and trust him to bring justice. We need that kind of a God; a God who helps to pull our fingers off of that need for fairness and trust his sense of justice. That's the God that Malachi describes.

Let Go Of Self-Reliance

Our demand for fairness isn't the only way we are focused on ourselves. The next big issue is for people everywhere. It's the issue that we just finished spending three weeks talking about: finances and generosity.

Malachi 3:6-12:

“I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. ⁷Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD Almighty.

“But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’

⁸“Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’

“In tithes and offerings. ⁹You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. ¹⁰Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the LORD Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. ¹¹I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit,” says the LORD Almighty. ¹²“Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the LORD Almighty.

The second issue is money. God begins by assuring his people that he won't destroy them. Not because they are faithful, but because he doesn't change. They can rest assured that his promise will be kept. But he charges them with being faithless. He says they have not kept his decrees. So he gives an invitation, “return to me, and I will return to you.” I won't destroy you even though you've been faithless, but you need to come back to me.

God does everything he can to invite us to return. Rachel and I like to watch the news spoof on *Saturday Night Live* called *Weekend Update*. They once ran a story about cats that went like this, “A woman in England paid over \$17,000 for her cat to spend six days in an oxygen tent to cure his paralyzed larynx. The cat showed its gratitude by briefly holding eye contact.” Cats aren't known for their ability to return affection. Are we?

God says, “Return to me.” Do they? No. They play dumb. “How are we supposed to return? What do you mean? We don't know what you're talking about.” So God tells them that they are robbing him. Do they understand now? Nope. Still not yet. “What do you mean we're robbing you? We still don't know what you're talking about.” They still don't admit it.

Money is always an issue. We talked about this a few weeks ago. It's just so hard sometimes to let go of our stuff. Money is so powerful in this world. For God's

people here, the issue seems to be trust. Can they really trust God to provide for them if they give him what he asks? That's the question for us as well. Can we really trust God with our finances? God goes to all these great lengths for us and we respond by making eye contact for a few moments before going on our way. Thanks for the help. I got it from here. Can we let go of our demand to be self-reliant and trust him? **Let Go Of Self-Reliance.**

Actually, Israel had always had a really hard time with the tithe. After all the instructions for the tithe given in Leviticus and Deuteronomy, you don't hear about the tithe at all until the time of Hezekiah. That's around 700 years that we have no record of whether the tithe was collected. There are some moments in Hezekiah's reign and later where the prophets described how the tithe was collected in full as part of a reform movement. But that suggests that collecting the tithe might not have been as regular an occurrence as it was supposed to be.

Money is one of the main ways that we make sure things are going to be OK. We use money to ensure that our lives look the way we want them to look. We eat the foods we want to eat, we drive the cars we want to drive, we go on the vacations that we want to go on. If we give up control of our money, how are we going to make sure that we're happy? God says, "Exactly. You let me be in charge of that."

In fact, that's what he promises them. He says, "Go ahead and test me." Give to me what I ask you to give and see what happens. Just do a test. See if I don't take care of you. God says that if you will be as ridiculously generous as I told you to be, then I will bless you in even more ridiculous ways. You won't have enough room to store all the blessings I will give you. Nobody will steal it, it won't get eaten by moths, and your fruit won't fall off too early. Go ahead, test me. Bring it on!

Now, we live in a different era than they did in the Old Testament. God doesn't promise material blessing to us in the same way that he did to his people in the Old Testament, but the New Testament is clear that the life of obedience to Christ does lead to blessing. Maybe not healthy apples on your trees, but blessings nonetheless. It's still true that if we trust God with all of us, including our money, he will take care of us.

What would happen if we tested God in this? What would happen if you aspired to the kind of ridiculous generosity that God's people have been known for throughout history? Would you fall on your face? I don't think so. Would God pour blessings on you? I can't promise that you will receive material blessings, but I

don't think you will regret your generosity. I'm confident that God will do something with it.

Can we let go? Can we allow God to draw us away from our insistence on providing for ourselves? Our demand that I be in control of my money so that I can make sure that my life looks exactly the way I want it to look. Can we let go of the need to provide for ourselves? Can we return to God and let him return to us? Can we trust him with everything and let him bless us?

Let Go Of Entitlement

God is trying to draw us away from ourselves toward him. He is wooing us to come close to him. To leave our self-centeredness behind and let him in. First, we complain that bad people are getting away with things, so he assures us that justice is coming. We are invited to let go of our demand for fairness on our terms. Then, we complain that we need to make sure to provide for ourselves, and he assures us that if we trust him with our resources, he will take care of us. We are invited to let go of our demand to provide for ourselves.

We have two cats in our family. They are both outdoor cats so we don't see them all the time. One in particular seems like she is kind of too good for us. So when she comes around, there's a lot of excitement in our house. The kids try to go outside really carefully so they can pick her up without scaring her off. That's the last issue we're talking about. Our sense that we deserve special treatment.

The last argument that we are looking at today is similar to the first, but comes from the other direction.

Malachi 3:13-15:

¹³"You have said harsh things against me," says the LORD. "Yet you ask, 'What have we said against you?' ¹⁴"You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? ¹⁵But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.'"

Once again, God is complaining about how his people are talking about him. In the first argument, they were wearying God with their words. Now he says that they are saying "harsh things" against him and once again, God's people get defensive. We're not ready to listen to more criticism. So they ask what they have said

and God lets them know: you don't think it's worth it. You think that following me is futile. You think that being obedient doesn't pay off and this whole life of faith just isn't worth the trouble that it costs.

"It is futile to serve God." This is the flip side of the first argument. First, they complained that the bad people are going unpunished. Now, they are complaining that the good people are going unrewarded. It goes both ways. When we are honest with ourselves, we go through seasons where we have this same question. Is all of this really worth it? Is it really worth it to give away my money? Is it really worth it to give away my time? Is it really worth it to care about people? Is it worth it to follow God, or is all of this just a waste? We have to answer that question for ourselves. Is it really worth it or not?

The funny thing about this argument with God is that it's a bit different than the others. In most of them, God says something, he quotes what the people say, and then he responds with something else. But in this one, we get to see what the people say, but it doesn't look like God responds. Malachi continues with a different scene that we'll look at next week. All the threads get pulled together as God describes in more detail the one that is coming. But God doesn't seem to have a response to this final argument.

That's the worst way to lose an argument. For three chapters, we've heard God and his people go at it. He's been in their face, challenging to get it together. Receive his love. Don't mess around with fake religion. Don't pretend to believe, but live a life of disobedience. Don't insist on what you call fair and don't rob God by refusing to be generous. It's been a long series of fights. Here's another one. God says something; we hear what his people say; and then silence. You can almost hear God sigh after verse 15.

I've lost arguments like this. You're all fired up and you're launching accusation after accusation, trying to make sure your voice is heard, defending yourself, and standing up for yourself. Then the other person just gets quiet and sighs and you realize that even if you win with words, you've lost the love. That's what God does here. It's almost like he says, "I can't answer that one. You have to decide whether or not it's worth it. I'm done trying to talk you into it."

So the last challenge is for us to let go of our demand that life should look a certain way. Stop thinking that you've given God so much that he owes you something. Stop thinking about how much you've given up to follow God and how little you've gotten in return.

Stop thinking that other people have it better than you and if God just left you alone that you'd be better. Stop thinking that you deserve better treatment from God. Let go of your sense of entitlement. **Let Go Of Entitlement.**

As we wrestle with this question ourselves, we can look a bit closer at how God's people asked it and find some more of ourselves in it. They said, "What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?"

Two things strike me about their comment. First of all, when did they carry out his requirements? When were they faithful to God's commands for their lives? If they were, we don't have a record of it. This sounds like a case of them remembering things a bit differently than the way that God remembers them.

Do we do the same thing? We think that we've given up so much for God. We think that we've worked so hard to be obedient and it hasn't gained us anything. But have we really? Would God say that we've carried out his requirements? Are we really in a position to judge whether it is worth it? We haven't even put God to the test have we?

The second thing to notice is how they describe the life of following God: "Going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty." This explains a lot. Is this what they think the life of faith is like? Is this what God asks of us? You need to be sad all the time. You can't have any fun. You can't participate in the things that other people participate in. Is this how we think of God? That he is some kind of cosmic kill-joy, the strict librarian of life who doesn't allow any noise at all?

When we really look at those words, we realize what a faulty view of obedience that is, but it's an idea that we still hold onto today. For me, this is what I sometimes perceived Christianity to be about. All the good things that the world enjoyed were labeled bad: sex, drinking, fun, and parties. We can sometimes think that God is most pleased when we are suffering the most, but that isn't how it works! God made all the good things in life. He made sex to be enjoyed. He made food to be enjoyed. He made people to be enjoyed. He made life to be enjoyed. Following God is about life—the experience of what Jesus calls true life or "life to the full."

When I was in high school, there was a song by Stephen Curtis Chapman that helped me learn this. One of the lines was, "There's no greater place on earth than the road that leads to heaven." After having walked that road a little bit more than I had in high school,

I am absolutely convinced that there is no greater life than the life of faith.

One of the new mottos of the San Francisco 49ers is a call and response that their new coach has introduced to the team. He asks, "Who's got it better than us?" and they respond "Nobody." The same could be said of those who follow Christ. Who has it better than us? People who have sex with anyone and everyone? I've talked to some of them. They don't have it better than us. People who spend all their money on themselves? I've talked to them. They don't have it better than us. People who slander, hate, lie, and steal? I know some of them and they don't have it better than us. People who are convinced that what you see is what you get and there is nothing more to life? I know a lot of them and they definitely don't have it better than us.

The life of faith is the life that we are meant to live. This is life to the full and it's not perfect by any means. It's full of difficulty, suffering, and pain. I've had my share of those things and I'm sure I'll face more of it to come, but I'd far rather go through those things with Christ than without him. This life of faith is worth it. Every moment of it. Every shred of obedience that I offer up to God pays off. In my honest moments, I've never regretted obeying God and I've never heard of anyone that did.

But it can be a struggle to remember that because it looks like others have it better. It looks like the world is winning. It looks like disobedience and faithlessness is a lot more fun and a lot easier, but that's a lie. I'm reminded of Paul's words at the end of Galatians to a very young church as they are just learning how to live the life of faith.

Galatians 6:7-9:

⁷Do not be deceived: God cannot be mocked. A man reaps what he sows. ⁸The one who sows to please his sinful nature, from that nature will reap destruction; the one who sows to please the Spirit, from the Spirit will reap eternal life. ⁹Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time we will reap a harvest if we do not give up.

Don't become weary of doing good. Don't believe the lie that obedience isn't worth it. Don't believe the

idea that following God means going around like mourners. That isn't the life of faith. Can we let go of our insistence to ensure that we are living the best life and trust that God will provide that for us? Can we let go of all those lies and trust that God will lead us to life? The life of faith is worth it.

Conclusion

The truth is that we all have a serious addiction. We are addicted to ourselves. We are addicted to the notion that life is fair to everyone else but unfair to us. We are addicted to the idea that our money is our money and we need to make sure that it goes toward what we want it to go toward. We are addicted to the self-pitying idea that we've done everything right and not been rewarded at all for it. We need someone to help us break that addiction.

So God intervenes. If we can let him pull us away from ourselves, we will enter into a life of blessing. When we trust him, he will take care of us. Walk away from yourself. Let it go. Allow God to call to you and woo you away from your obsession with self.

I've grown to like cats. But at least in terms of relating to God, we need to be more like dogs than cats. We need to turn away from ourselves to let these things go.

God helps us in this by giving us the perfect model of how to do this. Jesus came as a model of how to sacrifice the self. He trusted God through it all; through powerful times of celebration; through healing; through deep relationships and times of suffering, betrayal, execution, and mockery. But God took care of him. So much so that at the name of Jesus every knee shall bow. Trust God and he will bless you.

As we wait for Jesus, he is the one calling out to us, but he is also our model. If he can leave it behind, he encourages us to do the same. Take up your cross. Murder your selfishness. Give up your rights. Follow God. Take a risk and it will pay off. Who's got it better than those who follow Christ? Nobody.