WHY SERVE GOD?

Malachi 3:13-18

By

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Malachi Lesson 10

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Do you ever get discouraged in serving God, to the point that you feel like quitting? Many pastors do. I read recently that 1,500 pastors a month in the United States are leaving the ministry. Some leave because of moral failure, but many leave because of spiritual burnout or discouragement because of opposition or contention in their congregations.

Several recent surveys revealed that 85 percent of pastors said that they are weary of dealing with problem people. Seventy percent said that they felt that God had called them to pastoral ministry before their ministry began, but after three years of ministry, only 50 percent still felt called (from an email sent out on January 30, 2003, by the late Bill Bright and the Global Pastors Network).

At our men’s retreat last weekend, I was chatting with our speaker, Dennis Ahern, who is the West Coast Regional Director for CB International. He said that while there are many short-term mission workers, few are accepting the call to be career missionaries, and even of those, many are serving only one term. Apparently, many pastors and missionaries need to think through the question, “Why serve God?”

I encounter many in the local church who have served God, sometimes for many years, but they feel burned out and they are not involved in serving any longer. In some cases, they drop out of church altogether, claiming that they can worship God better by avoiding the church. In other cases, they may attend church, but that’s all that they do. If you ask them to serve, they say, in effect, “No thanks! Been there, done that!” In many cases, they were criticized or attacked for their efforts. Often, they feel unappreciated and used. But whatever the reason, they are not serving. Our text speaks to all such burned out workers, answering the question, “Why serve God?”

The people in Malachi’s day had grown indifferent to God’s great love. The theme of Malachi is, “I have loved you,” says the
Lord. But the callused response of the people was, “How have You loved us?” (1:2). The prophet seeks to show them that the problem was not on God’s part. It never is. The problem was their sinfully selfish, temporal perspective. They needed to see things from God’s eternal perspective and serve Him by faith.

Behind their wrong attitude was the age-old subject that we covered in 2:17: Why do the wicked prosper and the godly suffer? You may wonder, Why bring it up again so soon? The answer is, this problem doesn’t get put to rest once and for all. It keeps creeping back into our thinking. God knows that we wrestle with it, and so He graciously addresses the subject repeatedly, so that we will maintain His perspective when we are tempted to think that it is vain to serve Him. The prophet shows us:

**We should serve God because He notices and cares deeply for all who serve Him.**

There are two groups in our text. Group A (3:13-15) is the group to Avoid. This group grumbled against God, complaining that there is no reward for serving Him; you may as well be an arrogant, wicked person who tests God and escapes. Group B (3:16-18) is the group to Be in. These people feared God and esteemed His name. They encouraged one another to continue serving God in spite of the seeming prosperity of the wicked and suffering of the righteous. God takes special notice of them and promises that He will spare them in the day of judgment because they are His special treasure.

1. **Group A: Avoid being among those who complain about serving God (3:13-15).**

   This group spoke arrogantly or harshly against the Lord, but when the prophet confronts them, they ask, “What have we spoken against You?” As verses 14-15 show, they weren’t directly shaking their fists at God. Rather, they were complaining to one another, but God was eavesdropping! He always does, of course! He notices all that we think or say. But these people were not God-oriented, and so they spoke brazenly to one another, voicing their common complaints as if God were deaf or non-existent.

   Their complaint was, “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?” (3:14). They went even farther, probably in sarcastic mockery. They called the arrogant blessed, and said that wicked people are not only built up, but also they test God and escape (3:15). There are four characteristics of this group to avoid:

A. These people were sitting in judgment on God, rather than submitting to His dealings with them.

Whenever we grumble about our circumstances or the wrong treatment that we have received, we are really elevating ourselves above God. We are saying, in effect, “God, I could run this universe better than You are running it! I’m just trying to serve You, and all I get is unfair treatment and trouble. But the guy who arrogantly defies You is living a happy life. I’d fix this problem if I were in charge!” What arrogance, to think that somehow I’d do a better job of running the universe than the Lord of hosts!

One of the most prevalent sins of the Israelites in the wilderness was their spirit of grumbling and complaining against God. They rather would have returned to slavery in Egypt than to trust God and endure hardship in the wilderness! He had delivered them from bondage in a dramatic and miraculous way through the Red Sea. From there, they went three days into the wilderness, found no water, and began to grumble (Exod. 15:22-27).

Later they grumbled about the boring manna that God faithfully supplied every day, and so the Lord graciously provided quail (Numbers 11). They grumbled at the report of the spies about the giants in the land, and talked about appointing a leader to return to Egypt (Numbers 14). God was displeased with their grumbling. That entire generation, except for Joshua and Caleb, who trusted God, died in the wilderness (Num. 14:26-38).

Whenever we grumble about our circumstances, we are impugning the character of God and exalting ourselves above Him. We’re saying, “God doesn’t really love us, or He wouldn’t let us be in this difficult place.” And, we’re saying, “I know better than God what is good for me.” John Calvin observes, “But in the service of God the chief thing is this— that men deny themselves and give themselves up to be ruled by God, and never raise a clamor when he humbles them” (Calvin’s Commentaries [Baker reprint], on Malachi
3:13, pp. 595-596). As Paul exhorts us from his prison cell, “Do all things without grumbling or disputing; that you may prove yourselves to be blameless and innocent, children of God above reproach in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom you appear as lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15).

B. These people had a self-centered attitude.

They ask, “What profit is it that we have kept His charge ... ?” (3:14). What’s in it for us? The Hebrew word translated “profit” was a technical term for a weaver cutting a piece of cloth free from the loom. The idea here is that these people expected their “cut” or percentage, much as a gangster would demand his cut for his dirty work (Walter Kaiser, Malachi, God’s Unchanging Love [Baker], p. 98). They were grumbling that God hadn’t given them their fair share.

Be careful here! The flesh is inclined to self-pity, self-focus, and self-centeredness, and the world feeds this. If there’s nothing in it for you, why do it? If the church isn’t meeting your needs, bail out. You deserve some happiness. You can’t worry about the needs of others! God understands. Your needs come first!

We need to be careful about how we present the gospel. If we approach it as, “Come to Jesus and He will meet all your needs,” we aren’t giving the full picture. It’s true, of course, that Jesus satisfies the deepest longings of every heart that trusts in Him. But He is not Aladdin’s Genie, waiting to grant our every wish. While following Christ brings us deep and lasting joy, the path to that joy is daily self-denial and the cross (Luke 9:23-24), which are not immediately pleasant experiences!

I always chuckle when I read about the time Peter said to Jesus, “Behold, we have left everything and followed You.” Jesus affirmed that whatever they had given up to follow Him, they would receive a hundred times as much in this present age. Then, while I’m sure the disciples were nodding in approval, Jesus added almost offhandedly, “along with persecutions; and in the age to come, eternal life” (Mark 10:28-30).

What’s in it for you, if you serve the Lord? He gives abundant blessings, both in this life and in eternity. But don’t forget the persecutions! “All who desire to live godly in Christ Jesus will be per-
secuted” (2 Tim. 3:12). Self-centered people don’t last long in serving God.

C. These people had lost the motivation for holy living.

They asked, “What profit is it that ... we have walked in mourning before the Lord of hosts?” (3:14). Outwardly, they went through the motions of fasting and humbling themselves before God. But they were not doing these things out of a heart of love and devotion for God. Inwardly they were thinking, “This religion stuff is a drag! We want some fun out of life!”

Motivation is everything when it comes to obeying and serving God. I read about an elderly Christian lady who was a shut-in. She had two daughters, both Christians, who came by to clean and help out. Both made everything shine, but the first daughter left the impression that her task was an awful burden. The second daughter was cheery and made her mother feel loved. Both daughters did the same task, but the first did it out of duty alone. The second did it out of love for her mother. Her motive made all the difference.

Jesus rebuked the church at Ephesus. They were doing many good things. They had persevered and endured for Christ’s sake. But they had left their first love for Him (Rev. 2:1-4). When Jesus restored Peter to service after his fall, He asked three times, “Do you love Me?” With that as a foundation, He said, “Tend My sheep” (John 21:15-17). Paul said, “... the life which I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me, and delivered Himself up for me” (Gal. 2:20). Love for the Lord Jesus, who gave Himself on the cross for me, should be the motive behind everything that I do for Him.

So this group to avoid was sitting in judgment on God, they had a self-centered attitude, and they had lost the motivation of love as the basis for holy living and service.

D. These people had focused on the seeming prosperity of the wicked, but had lost the eternal perspective.

While saying that it is vain to serve God, they were calling the arrogant blessed. From all that they could see, there was no reward for following God, and there were many rewards for defying God and seeking your own prosperity.
Whenever we start thinking that way, we have lost God’s eternal perspective and adopted the world’s temporal perspective. Asaph wrote about this in Psalm 73. He contrasted the prosperity of the wicked with his own trials and concluded that he was following God in vain. This was troublesome in his sight until he went into the sanctuary of God. There he considered the end of the wicked and the reward of the righteous. I encourage you to meditate on that Psalm whenever you’re tempted in this manner.

Also, read Paul’s great resurrection chapter, 1 Corinthians 15. He states (15:19), “If we have hoped in Christ in this life only, we are of all men most to be pitied.” Why serve Christ if this life is all there is? Rather, “eat and drink, for tomorrow we die” (15:32). But, if Christ is risen and if we will be raised from the dead also, Paul’s conclusion is, “Be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not in vain in the Lord” (15:58). So avoid Group A. But there’s a second group:

2. **Group B: God notices and cares for those who fear and serve Him in spite of hardships (3:16-18).**

This is the group to Be in! They were probably the minority group, numbers-wise. But God always has a faithful remnant that serves Him in spite of many difficulties. Note that Group B, those who serve God, are called righteous, whereas Group A are called wicked (3:18). That is not to say that serving God earns the label of “righteous.” We can do nothing to commend ourselves to God. Our righteousness is in the Lord Jesus Christ, whose righteousness is imputed to us as a gift of God’s grace through faith (Rom. 3:21-26). But serving God is a distinguishing mark of the righteous person, whereas not serving God marks the wicked, who live for themselves. There are two, and only two, groups here. Either you have not trusted in Christ and you live for yourself, or you have been justified by faith in Christ and now you live to serve Him. Make sure that you’re in Group B, not in Group A! Three characteristics mark Group B:

A. These people fear God and esteem His name above the opinions of others.

Twice verse 16 emphasizes that these people feared God, and it further adds that they esteemed His name. “Estee...
“thought upon”) means to meditate, to regard, and thus to set value on something. Isaiah (13:17) uses the word to describe the Medes, who “will not value silver” when they invade Babylon. In other words, they would not be bought off with silver, because they did not value it above victory. (See also, Isa. 53:3.)

In our text, this group valued the Lord and His character (“name”) above the majority opinion. They didn't go with the prevailing flow of their day, because they looked to God in His majesty, and they feared Him and valued Him above everything else.

In my opinion, the Christian world today needs a revived emphasis on the proper fear of God. We rightly emphasize God's love, because “God is love” (1 John 4:8). But we are out of balance if we emphasize God’s love to the neglect of the fear that is due to His holy name.

I wish that many of God’s people today, who view God as their Good Buddy, would read John Bunyan’s excellent “Treatise on the Fear of God” (The Works of John Bunyan [Baker], 1:437-491). He writes, “When God comes to bring a soul news of mercy and salvation, even that visit, that presence of God, is fearful” (p. 438). In God’s presence, he says, “even our best things, our comeliness, our sanctity and righteousness, all do immediately turn to corruption and polluted rags” (p. 439). The proper fear of God causes us to hate evil and turn from it (Prov. 3:7; 8:13; 16:6). Too many pastors today fear what people think of them more than they fear what God thinks of them! Fearing God gives us the courage to confront sin, even if people don’t like us for doing so.

B. These people encourage one another in the face of surrounding evil.

“Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another” (3:16). “Then” refers to verse 15, when the wicked called the arrogant blessed. Group B had to counter the evil talk of Group A. They had to be as bold for God as Group A was bold for evil. They did it by getting together and talking. We are not told specifically what they said, but they probably encouraged one another by saying, “Don’t listen to these scoffers. Don’t give up serving the Lord! He will reward all that serve Him and He will judge the wicked scoffers.”
The point is, we need fellowship with like-minded believers in order to stand firm against the wrong ideas that come at us from the world, the flesh, and the devil. If all you do is attend church and leave, but you don’t fellowship with other Christians during the week, you will struggle to maintain a godly perspective in the face of the evil around us. That’s why Hebrews 10:24-25 commands us to think about how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds, and not to forsake assembling together, but to encourage “one another, and all the more as you see the day drawing near.”

Group B fears God and encourages one another. Finally,

C. These people are especially noticed and cared for by God.

“The Lord gave attention and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him...” (3:16). The Hebrew word translated “gave attention” means to prick up the ears, as an animal does when it hears something. The word “heard” means to bend over so as not to miss a word. The picture is that of a parent, eavesdropping on the conversation between his children (Charles Simeon, Expository Outlines on the Whole Bible [Zondervan], 10:620-621). The book of remembrance probably refers to the record book that Persian kings kept with the names and favorable deeds of those who had helped the king (Esther 6:1-2).

God hears and remembers everything said by everyone at all times, of course. But these human pictures applied to God remind us that He is not forgetful of His children when they take a stand for Him or when they pay a price to serve Him (Heb. 6:10).

God promises that they will be His on the day that He prepares His own possession, or treasure. He will spare them when He judges the earth, as a man spares his own son who serves him. So God is assuring His people that He hears and takes notice of that which the world overlooks or despises. The world notices the powerful, rich, and famous. God notices those who fear Him and serve Him out of love. They are His special treasure. And so we should not despair at the seeming prosperity of the wicked or at our own trials. When God judges the earth, the line between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not, will be clear (3:18).
Conclusion

Years ago, an elderly missionary couple who had served for years in Africa, was returning to New York City to retire. They were feeling discouraged, defeated, and afraid. Their health was broken and they had no retirement pension. When they got to the wharf to board the ship, they discovered that they were booked on the same boat as President Theodore Roosevelt, who was returning from a big game hunt. No one paid any attention to this old couple, but they watched the fanfare as the President arrived. A band was playing and the crowd was waving and straining for a glimpse of the great man.

As the ship crossed the Atlantic, the old man grew more and more depressed. He said to his wife, “Something is wrong. Why should we have given our lives in faithful service for God in Africa all these years, and yet no one cares for us? This man comes back from a hunting expedition, and everyone throngs to see him. It doesn’t seem fair!” His wife tried to comfort him, but he couldn’t shake his depression.

As the boat docked in America, more bands were playing and more crowds had turned out to greet the President. Many dignitaries were there, and the papers carried the story on the front page. But no one noticed the missionaries. They slipped off the boat and went to hunt for a cheap apartment and for jobs.

That night, the man’s spirit broke. He felt that God had abandoned them. He complained to his wife, “We don’t have anyone to help us and no where to go. Why hasn’t God met our needs?” His wife wisely replied, “Why don’t you go in the bedroom and talk to the Lord about the whole thing?”

Some time later, he came out of the bedroom, but his face was different. He was happy now. His wife asked what happened. He said, “I went in and told the Lord the whole thing. I told Him that it’s not fair. I told Him how I was bitter because the President received this tremendous homecoming, but no one met us as we returned home. And you know, as I finished, it seemed as though the Lord put His hand on my shoulder and said simply, ‘My child, you’re not home yet.’” Why serve God? Because He notices and cares for all who serve Him!
Discussion Questions

1. What does it mean to serve God? Is it a position, a role, or a mindset?

2. How has our self-centered culture permeated the church? How has the church fostered this mentality?

3. Where is the proper balance between the love of God and the fear of God? How can we know when we’re in balance?

4. What would you say to a Christian who bitterly said, “I can worship God better by myself, apart from the church”?

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