

**Intro:** Though you may not notice them in our area, in the farm country of west-central Ohio, you see them all the time. You see them as you drive along in your car, and glance out your window. Often, they're located out in the middle of a wide open field. We had one at the end of the third-of-a-mile lane on our 120 acre farm. It's a large wooden post (others are made of concrete). I remember my father telling me, "You know what that is, don't you? That's a boundary marker. Years ago, the land in this area was divided into square sections. The boundary marker was put there as a point of identification. Stay on this side of the boundary marker, and you're on our land. Go beyond it, and you're on the neighbor's property."

What do you think would happen if, one night, someone went out and cut down all the boundary markers? Just imagine. The next day, your neighbor farmer would be out on his tractor plowing, and you'd notice he was on your property. You'd run out, waving your arms, shouting, "Stop! You're on my land!" And he'd say, "Says who? How do you know it's YOUR land? I've decided it's mine." And you turned to point to the boundary marker, but it was gone. When that boundary marker was there, you had an objective, non-partial, absolute standard. Without it, it's his opinion against yours.

My friends, God's absolutes are like boundary markers. But right now, in this very country, the Evil one is orchestrating a subtle plot to cut down God's boundary markers. His aim is to erase the boundary line between good and evil.

The following statistics provided by Josh McDowell (in Focus on the Family, Nov 94) reveal this sobering reality. He writes, "Early in 1994, we surveyed 3,795 kids (ages 11-18)...More than 80% of those surveyed attended an evangelical church weekly, and 86% said they had made a commitment to trust Christ as their Savior and Lord." (note: these are "our" kids!) The findings indicate serious problems when it comes to values and absolutes:

\*66% said they had lied to their parents or another adult in the last 3 months.

\*45% watched MTV at least once a week.

\*55% said they are confused. According to the survey, many others are cheating, smoking, gambling, watching X-rated movies and engaging in premarital sex.

What's happened to our kids? Josh McDowell offers this insight, "In past decades, children grew up in an atmosphere that communicated absolute standards for behavior: Certain things were right and certain things were wrong...A clear standard of right and wrong gave society a moral compass to measure crime and punishment, business ethics, community values, character and social conduct...Yet in the 1990's, our children are being raised in a society that rejects a standard of truth and morality, of right and wrong. Truth has become a matter of taste; morality a matter of preference."

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\*\*\*Note: This is an unedited manuscript of a message preached at Wheelersburg Baptist Church. It is provided to prompt your continued reflection on the practical truths of the Word of God.

The survey verifies this. Only 15% disagree with the statement: "What is right for one person in a given situation might not be right for another person who encounters the same situation." In other words, 85% of our kids are liable to reason, "Just because it's wrong for you doesn't mean it's wrong for me."

What happens when we tamper with God's absolutes? We can find out by looking at the case of the Israelites in the 5th century. They altered God's absolutes. God responded, through Malachi, in Malachi 2:17-3:5.

**Proposition: When the Israelites altered God's absolutes, God responded in two ways in Malachi 2:17-3:5.**

I. God revealed the people's problem (2:17).

The people wearied God with two sins...

A. They questioned God's commands.

B. They questioned God's character.

II. God revealed His future plan (3:1-5).

A. The Messiah would come (1).

1. He is the Lord.

2. He is the Messenger of the covenant.

B. The Day of the LORD would come (2-5).

1. It would be a day of refining (2-4).

2. It would be a day of judgment (5).

**I. God revealed the people's problem (2:17).**

Malachi the prophet speaks in v 17, "Ye have wearied the LORD with your words." That's an intriguing charge. How can an omnipotent God be "wearied"?

First, let me remind you of the setting. Malachi ministered about 4 centuries before Christ. The Babylonian exile is over. A remnant of Jews is back in the land. The temple is rebuilt, and the sacrificial system is functioning again. But God is displeased. Why? Because the priests were corrupt, and the people followed suit. The priests tampered with God's Word, and lowered God's standard. They told the people, "It's Ok to offer God your leftovers. Go ahead and keep the best lambs for yourself, and bring the lame ones for sacrifice. God doesn't seem to be too concerned these days anyway. Just look around. The land is in shambles. We're under pagan rule."

The people followed the priest's counsel. They took liberty to do their own thing. They left God's absolutes. They ignored God's clear commands. It showed up in their worship (ch 1), and it showed up in their family relationships (ch 2).

But God had enough of His people's deviancy. And Malachi told them, "You have wearied (i.e. "burdened") the Lord." Notice how the people responded (17), "Yet ye say, In what way have we wearied Him?" Those are the words of a pious, self-righteous people who are blind to their own faults.

What was their problem? It had to do with their words ("with your words"; "When ye say"). Malachi tells us two things the people were saying. One, "Every one that doeth evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them," and two, "Where is the God of justice?" The people wearied God with two sins...

A. They questioned God's commands.

According to the NIV, here's what the people were saying, "All who do evil are good in the eyes of the LORD, and He is pleased with them." Think of it. The people were saying that evil is good. In fact, they were saying that evil pleases God!

Why would they say that? Again, we need to understand the background. Things were tough in Malachi's day. Economic conditions were horrible, and had been for nearly 200 years. A hundred years earlier, the prophets Haggai and Zechariah preached, but in the people's eyes of Malachi's day, not much had happened. It seemed to them that God had forgotten His people. Life was little more than survival. Yet they watched pagan people like the Persians prosper. That was too much to handle. So they came to the conclusion, "Those who do evil (like the Persians) are good in God's eyes. God is pleased with them." Was that true? Was God pleased with the wicked Persians? No. Their time of judgment was coming.

By the way, there have been occasions when even righteous people have cried out to God about the unfairness of life. Men like Asaph (Ps 73) and Jeremiah (12:1) and Habakkuk (1:2-4) wondered why the wicked prospered, and God didn't seem to care.

But the people of Malachi's day went even further. They had become cynics. They were mockers and scorners. They questioned God's commands. They reversed God's truth. They took liberties to which man is not entitled and altered God's commands.

#### B. They questioned God's character.

Here's what they said in v 17, "Where is the God of justice?" The same Hebrew word rendered "justice" can also be translated "judgment." Malachi's people were guilty of blasphemy. They questioned God's character. "If God is just, why doesn't He do something? He must not care about good and evil, since He doesn't judge such wicked people like the Persians. If He lets pagan people get away with terrible crimes, He must not really be a God of justice."

Is God just? He sure is. But He operates according to a sovereign plan. Justice will come, maybe not when WE think it should, but it will. Notice 3:5, "And I will come near to you to judgment."

My friend, it is a serious crime to question God's commands and character. Yet we do the same in our day. We live in an age of relativism. Relativism says there is no objective standard of right and wrong. Relativism says evil is good. Take for instance, the entertainment industry. Hollywood glorifies evil, and we pipe it right into our living-rooms, and call it "entertainment." When was the last time you turned off your TV set, and said to your children, "We will not be entertained by what God says is wrong...?"

In Isa 5:20, God pronounced "woe to those who call evil good, and good evil." Prov 17:15 says that justifying the wicked is "an abomination to the Lord." Ps 5:4 says God is not One "who takes pleasure in wickedness." So how can we?

Challenge: We need to teach our children God's absolutes. When they're babies, and we see them reach for a hot stove, we say "No!" Is that being mean? No, it's teaching them what is acceptable behavior, and what is not. When they're a little older, we give them more boundaries: "Don't play in the street." "Don't stay out after

dark." "Pick up your room." Yet, as Josh McDowell observes (ibid), "Many parents fail to progress beyond communicating right and wrong commands with their children. They fail to explain why the commands are right or wrong. They stop short of providing a defense of the truth."

Do you think taking time to teach our children absolutes will really affect their lives? Listen to Josh McDowell again, "Our study indicates that when our children do not accept an objective standard of truth, they become: \*48% more likely to cheat on an exam; \*two times more likely to steal; \*two times more likely to watch a pornographic film; \*three times more likely to use illegal drugs; \*six times more likely to attempt suicide."

Let me ask you. Is there any area in your life where you have taken liberty to rationalize and alter God's absolutes? Is there any area of known sin in your life? If you're thinking, "Well, it's not a big thing, and it's not big deal. God won't mind," may I remind you that that's what Malachi's people said. But God is just.

When the Israelites altered God's absolutes, God confronted their problem. Then, He announced He was going to take action. What kind of action?

## **II. God revealed His future plan (3:1-5).**

Note: Remember, the Bible is inspired, but the verse numbering and chapter breaks are not. They were added later. Here's a case where some scribe made a poor choice. 2:17 really belongs with chapter three, not chapter two.

What did God say He was going to do? To the wayward Jews of Malachi's day, God said this in v 1, "Behold, I will send my messenger, and he shall prepare the way before me; and the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come..."

The Jews had said, "Where is the God of justice?" God answered, "You'll see. He's coming!" In vv 1-5, God revealed two activities that would unfold in His plan.

### A. The Messiah would come (1).

Before the arrival of the Messiah, God announced a messenger would arrive. In Hebrew, the words "my messenger" are actually "Malachi". It's true that Malachi was helping to prepare the world for the arrival of the Messiah, but v 1 has in mind another messenger. He's connected with the prophet Elijah (see 4:5). The New Testament makes it clear that "my messenger" is John the Baptist (Mt 11:10 quotes this verse).

What did God say His messenger would do? V 1 "And he shall prepare the way before Me." In the ancient Orient, whenever a king was going to arrive at a town or village, messengers were sent ahead. Their job was to make the necessary preparations for the royal guest. Oriental messengers leveled the roads, filled in the potholes, removed the boulders. God's messenger would likewise prepare the world.

The prophet Isaiah said this of the Messiah's forerunner, "The voice of him that cries in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low; and the crooked shall be made straight (Isa 40:3-4)."

When John the Baptist came, he preached repentance. He did spiritual housecleaning in Israel. His job was to get the world ready for the Messiah.

Who did Malachi say the Messiah would be? He reveals two truths about Him.

*1. He is the Lord.*

V 1 "And the Lord, whom ye seek, shall suddenly come to His temple." It was in the temple that the priests and people were offering God their leftovers. It was to the temple that the Messiah, "the Lord," would come. The Hebrew for "Lord" ("adon") signifies ownership. He shall come to "his" temple. He owns the temple. In fact, Malachi says that the coming Messiah would be the owner and master of everything.

Notice the Trinity in v 1. The pronouns shift from "me" to "he". God is speaking, "I will send my messenger...and the Lord shall come." The "Lord" is the second person of the Trinity, the Son of God. He is both God, and sent by God.

*2. He is the Messenger of the covenant.*

The Messiah is the fulfillment of all previous covenants (Abrahamic, Mosaic, Davidic). Jeremiah said He would establish the "new covenant." Malachi says he will come "quickly" (unexpectedly). The word appears 25 times in the OT, and nearly always is connected with disaster or judgment. He also says He is the One "whom ye seek. But the people had the wrong concept of His coming. What they didn't realize was that His coming would signal the beginning of judgment.

Here's the second activity God revealed about His future plan.

B. The Day of the LORD would come (2-5).

What is the Day of the Lord? The Old Testament had a very simple approach to eschatology. There was the "present age." And there was "the age to come." The "age to come" would be inaugurated by the period known as the "Day of the Lord."

The prophets announced the Day of the Lord would be an awesome day. Joel wrote, "For the day of the LORD is great and very terrible, and who can abide it?" Amos warned (5:18), "Woe unto you that desire the day of the LORD! To what end is it for you? The day of the LORD is darkness, and not light." Malachi 4:5 calls it "the great and terrible day of the LORD."

In vv 2-5, Malachi reveals two marks of the Day of the Lord.

*1. It would be a day of refining (2-4).*

Vv 2-3 "For He is like a refiner's fire, and like fuller's soap..." God uses two images to depict this refining work of the Messiah: fire and soap. First, He is compared to a refiner's fire. Fire burns. Fire tests. Fire purifies. Fire removes impurities. How does the refiner know when his task is done? When he looks into the liquid-hot silver, and he can see his own reflection (Kaiser, 85). Then the refining is done. That's what the Messiah would be like--a refiner's fire.

He would also be like "fuller's soap." The "fuller" was the laundryman. His job was to clean the clothes. He did it by trampling on them until the dirt was removed.

Malachi's people were saying, "We can't wait for the Day of the Lord. Then everything will be just great." But God, through Malachi, says, "Not exactly." V 2 says, "But who may abide the day of His coming." For unbelievers, that Day will be a nightmare. For those who reject the Messiah, that Day will be a Day of terror.

What will be the result of this refining? V 4 "Then shall the offering of Judah and Jerusalem be pleasant unto the LORD..." The word "pleasant" is a synonym for "acceptable." Malachi looks ahead and says, "The time is coming when there will be

no more hypocrisy in the Temple, no more cheap offerings. Things will be different when the Lord comes. His Day will be a day of refining."

The Lord has the power to change people. He possesses the power to cleanse, purify, make righteous, and refine. He is a refiner and launderer. That was good news for Malachi's people. They needed changing. They were going through empty religious motions. That's good news for us. We need it too.

If your life is barren and meaningless, look to the Lord. Religion isn't the answer. He is. When we yield our lives to Him, He changes us. He generates "righteousness" (3) and pure religion in us ("offerings," v 4).

What else will be true of the Day of the Lord?

2. *It would be a day of judgment (5).*

What Malachi (and the other prophets) didn't see clearly was that the Messiah would come TWICE, separated by a period of at least 1900 years. At His first coming, He began His work of refining, in the lives of His people. Yet what He began then He will culminate at His second coming.

V 5 "And I will come near to you to judgment; and I will be a witness against the sorcerers..." The Lord uses three legal terms in v 5: "come near," "judgment," and "witness." The people wanted justice (2:17). They'll get it.

God identifies a host of sins He would judge in that day. Everyone was a violation of His Law. Sorcerers will be judged (witchcraft was forbidden in Ex 22:18; in our day, that would include ouji boards, horoscopes, fascination with new age trinkets). Adulterers will be judged (forbidden in the Ten Commandments, Ex 20:14; in ch 2 men were leaving their wives for younger women). False swearers will be judged (lying under oath was denounced by Moses, Lev 19:12). Those that oppress the hireling will be judged (God said it was a serious offense to cheat a laborer out of his wages; Lev 19:13). By the way, if you are a Christian businessman, what's your aim, financial profit or justice? Is your bottom line to get rich or to honor God in your business?

The list continues. Those who oppress widows and orphans and aliens will be judged. What do widows, orphans, and aliens have in common? They are all vulnerable and helpless (God condemned all types of social injustice; Ex 22:22-24). By the way, how do you view the helpless? When you hear the news, do you ever think, "I wish those Haitian refugees would leave our shores and leave us alone?" Free handouts are not the answer, but neither is the injustice that results when God's people put their heads in the sand.

What's the bottom line in this list of sins? What is true of all who practice these sins? V 5 says, "And fear Me not." If I fear God, I won't mess with sorcery, leave my wife, lie, cheat my workers, and take advantage of the helpless. Why not? Because the issue is not, "What can I get away with?" If I fear God, every act I do is affected by the realization that God is my judge.

What's the point? God takes His Word seriously, and so must we. We have no right to alter His absolutes. He will judge those who do. The Day of the Lord is both a day of purifying and judgment. We need to make a decision today. We must decide to submit ourselves to the unalterable absolutes of God's Word.