

Intro: Do you like to play games? This past Christmas, my daughters received the game, "Junior Monopoly." We had a fun time playing it last week. The object of the game is to be the person who makes the most money. You accumulate money by buying property and collecting rent from the other participants in the game. The game is over when the first participant loses all his money. At times, it can get tense because in order for one player to win, another must lose. But after all, it's only a game. If you lose today, no big deal. You just put the game board away, and try again next week. It really doesn't matter in the light of eternity whether you win or lose a game.

For some people, church is a game. Ken Hemphill wrote a book that came out in 1990 entitled, "The Official Rule Book for the New Church Game." In it he points out that since the early 1960's most major denominations in the United States have experienced either a decline or they have plateaued. He asks the question, "Could it be that we have been guilty of going about our church activities and programs as if they were a 'new church game (15)?' He shares why he wrote his book (9-10), "My initiative in writing this book comes out of my love for the church and my conviction that the church is the body of Christ, the very cutting edge of spiritual awakening and world evangelization. We must recognize our potential, commit ourselves to the task, and experience the full empowering of God's Spirit. The church triumphant can and must become reality. We must become what we have been called to be. We cannot approach our involvement in the local church with a casual attitude that is inappropriate to our high calling. This is not a game! We are not dealing with issues as simple as life and death--but we are dealing with eternal issues. Our very best is required."

Is church a game in your life? You may wonder, "How can you tell? How can I determine if my life is genuine or if I am merely playing games with God?" Malachi can help us. Many of the people in his day were playing games with God.

Proposition: In Malachi 3:13-18, the Word of God identifies two groups of people, one that plays games with God, and one that doesn't.

I. Group #1: There are people who fiddle with God (13-15).

A. It's evidenced by their criticisms against God (13).

1. It's vain to serve God (14).

2. It's pointless to obey God (14).

3. It doesn't pay to be godly (15).

B. It's evidenced by their claims about themselves (15).

II. Group #2: There are people who fear God (16-18).

A. It's evidenced by what they do now (16).

1. They reverence God.

2. They rejuvenate one another.

***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.

3. They think on God's Name.
4. They serve God.

B. It's evidenced by their view of the future (17-18).

1. God will reward the righteous.
2. God will repay the wicked.

Implications: How should this affect my life?

1. Living for God is no game.
2. We must live this day in light of that day.

I. Group #1: There are people who fiddle with God (13-15).

The issue is how you treat God. Some people "fiddle" with God. By definition, to "fiddle" means "to be nervously or uselessly active."

The Israelites were playing games with God. In fact, as we saw last week, they had two problem areas in which they were robbing God. They robbed God in their living (6-7) and in their giving (8-12). They were stingy in their giving. God commanded them to give Him the firstfruits of their income, but they didn't. They robbed God of the tithes and offerings He deserved.

In vv 13-18, Malachi actually confronts a third problem area in the lives of his people--Their serving. Notice his admonition in v 13-14, "Your words have been stout against Me, saith the LORD...Ye have said, It is vain to SERVE God." The theme of serving appears again in v 17 and v 18. Malachi's people didn't truly serve God. They merely fiddled with God.

How can we tell if people are fiddling with God? Malachi pinpoints 2 evidences.

A. It's evidenced by their criticisms against God (13).

V 13 "Your words have been stout (NIV "harsh") against Me, saith the LORD." That's a strong indictment, but not the first time Malachi confronted his people's criticisms of God (see 1:2, 6, 7, 12; 2:14, 17; 3:7, 8). The people replied rather cynically (13), "What have we spoken so much against Thee?" Sounds kind of like what a defensive teenager would say to his mother when confronted about his/her actions--"What have I done wrong?!"

When I was a Resident Director in Quincer Dorm, I used to hear this kind of defensive response all the time. It was a Christian college, and we had several policies. One was that there was to be no consumption of alcoholic beverages. I remember walking by Bruce's room one day, and seeing a large wine bottle sitting in his window. I went to him, and he blurted out, "I haven't done anything wrong! It's a non-alcoholic drink." Sure enough, if you read the fine print, he was right. Bruce was a master when it came to "beating the system." And at defending himself.

What kind of criticisms were Malachi's people making against God? Notice 3...

1. It's vain to serve God (14).

V 14 "Ye have said, It is vain to serve God." Have you ever felt like you served God and got a raw deal? The people of Israel did.

The word "vain" appears in the third commandment, "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord your God in VAIN." It means "empty, without value and worth." That's how the people felt about serving God--It's not worth it.

2. *It's pointless to obey God (14).*

Notice the people's question in v 14, "What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts?" The Hebrew word for "profit" was a technical term used for weavers cutting a piece of cloth from the loom. In Malachi's day it also had the negative connotation of a gangster demanding his "cut" for his work (Kaiser, 98). The people criticised God, "We've kept God's Word, and we've even fasted and mourned, but where's our 'cut'? Where's the profit? There hasn't been any. It's pointless to obey God."

Note: Had the people obeyed God in the first place? No way! (see v 7)

3. *It doesn't pay to be godly (15).*

In v 15, the people exhibited inverted values. They looked at life around them, and drew three erroneous conclusions. One, they said the proud were the happy ones, not them. Two, the wicked had it made, not them. And three, the ones who challenged God got the breaks, not them. Read v 15, "And now we call the proud happy..."

What conclusion had Malachi's people drawn? It doesn't pay to be godly.

How did they arrive at such a pessimistic (and heretical) deduction? A. W. Tozer wrote (The Knowledge of the Holy, 85), "I think it might be demonstrated that every heresy that has afflicted the church through the years has arisen from believing about God things that are not true, or from over-emphasizing certain true things so as to obscure other things equally true. To magnify any attribute to the exclusion of another is to head straight for one of the dismal swamps of theology; and yet we are all constantly tempted to do just that."

How can you tell if someone is fiddling with God? First, in Malachi's day, it was evidenced by criticisms leveled against God. So in our day.

The popular mentality today in the American Church is, "What's in it FOR ME?" and not, "What's the RIGHT thing to do?" For instance, someone says, "If I don't get anything out of church, I won't go." Or, "Since my marriage isn't satisfying me, I'm getting out of it." Or, "I don't enjoy Christian service any more, so I'm checking out." A teen reasons this way, "I've tried to be pure, but all I get is ridicule and grief. It's not worth it."

Is it vain to serve God? Is it pointless to obey God and be godly? Not according to God. It's always right to do right.

One of the tributes given at John Branon's Memorial Service that challenged me most was this. "John served God not for men's applause, but because it was the right thing to do." The reward for serving God is eternal, though it may not be seen now. If we think it's vain to serve God, we need a perspective adjustment.

The fact that the Israelites "fiddled" with God is evidenced by their criticisms against God.

B. It's evidenced by their claims about themselves (15).

Take another look at v 15. What were the people saying? Read between the lines, and hear is what you'll see, "The proud have it made. So do the wicked and those who test God. God, we deserve better from You. We've been good, but have gotten a raw deal for it. Blatant pagans get off scott-free, while we take it on the chin. It's not fair God!"

Quite often people who "fiddle" with God have an inflated view of themselves. They're pretty impressed with their lives, and they think God ought to be as well. But He's not.

Walter Kaiser makes this observation (95), "All too frequently contemporary churchgoers act as if God owes them something once they have participated in, or merely attended, services in the house of God--no matter how cold or bankrupt the real affections of their hearts were in that service!" Kaiser calls that a "mercenary approach to serving God."

God won't tolerate people who fiddle with Him. Remember what He told the Laodiceans in Rev 3:16-17? "So, then, because thou art lukewarm, and neither cold nor hot, I will spew thee out of my mouth. Because thou sayest, I am rich, and increased with goods, and have need of nothing, and knowest not that thou art wretched, and miserable, and poor, and blind, and naked."

How can we tell if we are "fiddling" with God? Look for two evidences--unjust criticisms against God, and inflated claims about ourselves. You see, those who play games with God can put on quite a show on the outside, and can even talk a big talk. But it's all a sham. On the inside they are void of true godliness and piety.

Church pews are filled with two groups of people this morning. First, there are people who are playing games, who fiddle with God. There's a second group.

II. Group #2: There are people who fear God (16-18).

Notice the shift in pronouns from "we" in v 15 to "they" in v 16. Things were bleak in Malachi's day, but God had His remnant. V 16 is about the godly remnant, "Then they that feared the LORD spoke often one to another..."

This second group faced the same hardships the first group faced. But instead of responding with cynicism, instead of leveling criticisms against God, instead of becoming bitter, those in the second group chose to fear God.

What's true of people who genuinely fear God?

A. It's evidenced by what they do now (16).

Notice four activities which are true of those who fear God.

1. They reverence God.

V 16 says, "Then they that feared the LORD...and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the LORD." You get the idea from reading Malachi 1-3 that there were no god-fearing people left. Malachi may have wondered, as had Elijah, "Am I the only one left?! Is there no one else around here who fears God?" That's what makes v 16 so refreshing! There was a group, small no doubt, yet it was there nonetheless, of people who revered God. That's what it means to "fear" God.

In the Old Testament, "fearing God" is a virtual synonym for righteous living. When we fear God, we reverence Him. When we fear God, it shows up in our lifestyle (see: Lev 19:14; Deut 17:19). When we fear God, His influence touches every area of our lives.

2. They rejuvenate one another.

Notice what the people who feared God were doing? They "hung around" together. V 16 says, "They spoke often one to another." Did you catch that? Individuals who feared God made it a point to invest time talking with other people who feared God.

You may ask me, "Pastor, I want to learn to fear God. What should I do?" In part, here's the answer--make it a point to spend time with others who fear God. Listen, spend time with negative people--with critics--and that's what you'll become, negative and critical. That's why it's so important to come to church, to make it a point to spend time with other people who fear God. People who fear God sharpen and rejuvenate each other. You can't get that from the TV church.

But what do God-fearers talk about when they get together? Malachi doesn't tell us what they said, but we can imagine. They talk about the Lord, and how much He means to them! Notice the third evidence of those who fear God...

3. They think on God's Name.

Notice the end of v 16, "And that thought upon (NIV "honor") His Name." See that? Those who fear God don't live their lives based on their feelings, but based on the truth of God. They think about God, Who He is, what He is like, what He has said.

By the way, this underscores the importance of true, biblical meditation. If we are experience the fear of God, we need to learn to mull over and saturate our minds with the truth of God.

4. They serve God.

To those who fiddle with God, serving God is vain. But to those who fear God, serving God is the most natural thing to do. That's the bottom-line difference between the two groups, as we see in v 18. "Then shall ye return and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serves God and him that serves him not."

Which is true of you--are you serving God or are you not? Can you say, "I know for sure I am doing with my life exactly what God wants me to do,"?

People who fear God can. They reverence God, they rejuvenate each other, they think about God's Name, and they serve God. What else is true of people who genuinely fear God? It's evidenced, first, by what they do in the present, and...

B. It's evidenced by their view of the future (17-18).

People who fear God know God is in control, of the present, and of the future. There are two things we can know about the future, according to vv 17-18.

1. God will reward the righteous.

When? Notice three key words, "IN THAT DAY." There's a big difference between "this day" and "that day"! What's true about "this day"? In "this day" we have trouble, and affliction, and maybe even injustice. But what's true about "that day"? For those who fear God, there are three guarantees revealed in v 17.

First, in that day we will be God's! In the Hebrew text of v 17, the word "mine" is emphatic. Second, in that day we will be God's treasured possession (NIV). We will be God's jewel. God has something special in store for us. And third, in that day, God will "spare" us. V 16 indicates God keeps records ("book of remembrance").

What a day that will be! God will reward the righteous. But there's another side to "that day."

2. God will repay the wicked.

There's another unfortunate chapter break between chapters 3 & 4. 4:1 describes what will happen to the wicked in that day, "For, behold, the day cometh, that shall burn like an oven, and the proud...shall be stubble." More about this next week.

Implications: How should this affect my life?

1. Living for God is no game.

We need to take inventory. Have we been "playing church"? If we have we need to stop, and get serious about serving God. Living for God is no game.

One of our problems is that we want our "treasure" NOW, but God says it's for His people in THAT day. Bob Litteral made an interesting observation in a conversation last week. He said many American Christians have deified the American constitution. We think we deserve certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We think we deserve to be happy NOW. We live for instant gratification. If something doesn't make me happy NOW, we get rid of it (whether an unborn baby, or a spouse I don't love any more).

Let me ask you something. Was Jesus "happy" during the 40 days of testing in the wilderness? Was Jesus "happy" in the Garden of Gethsemene? Was Jesus "happy" when the soldiers ripped His back open? Was He "happy" when He endured our hell on the cross? Heb 12:2 says, "Looking unto Jesus...Who for the joy that was set before Him, endured the cross, despising the shame."

We sing, "Be like Jesus, this my song," but if we're serious about being like Jesus, we need to adopt a higher goal that present happiness. What is that goal?

2. We must live this day in light of that day.

Sometimes we may wonder, "Is it worth it to live a godly life?" In our country we get a lot of "fringe" benefits for living for God (although this is changing). Basically, if we live good, wholesome Christian lives, we are recognized as good, decent, upstanding citizens--even in the eyes of non-saved people. And we enjoy a more than comfortable standard of living. But even if we didn't, it would still be worth it to fear God. Why? Because of "that day."

Growing up we had a Border Collie dog named Andy. He had one great love in life, that was to watch and roundup the livestock. Andy would rather work than eat. In the pouring down rain, he'd be out in the field, lying in the mud, watching the cows. He delighted in hearing two words from his master, "Good job."

May God help each of us to make a decision this morning--to live this day in light of that day. In the words of the hymnwriter, "It will be worth it all, when we see Jesus." So I ask you. Are you a person who fiddles with God or one who fears God? Choose to fear God today, by submitting your life totally to Jesus Christ.