

## **“The Great Gain of Godliness (Part 1)”<sup>1</sup>** **(An Exposition of Malachi 3:16-18)<sup>2</sup>**

### ***Introduction***

Last Lord's day we looked at Malachi 3:13-15, where God rebukes those among His people who were speaking **“hard”** words against Him (v.13), saying that it was **“vain to serve God”** (v.14). Now part of their error and sin was that they were guilty of *hypocrisy*, claiming to have been serving God, when they were merely going through the motions of worship, and even committing iniquity and abominations in God's sight. To use the language of Isaiah 1:13, they were guilty of mixing **“iniquity and solemn assembly.”**

Here in our text we see the flip side of this situation – here in v.16-18 Malachi tells us of the faithful remnant - **“those who feared the LORD”** (v.16) and truly served Him. And to those who feared the Lord and truly served Him, God promised great reward. They must not lose heart because of the evil speaking of the wicked even among them in the visible church, but must take heart and be encouraged that, as God promises here in our text, they themselves would surely **“see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him.”** (v.18)

The great Puritan writer, Thomas Watson (1620-1686) wrote a commentary of sorts on this passage. His book is entitled *The Great gain of Godliness*. I have shamelessly borrowed the title of his book as the title of this sermon, and would commend that short book (just 166 pages in the Banner of Truth edition) for your reading and edification. It is well worth your time.

While we certainly *won't* be spending quite as much time on our text in this sermon as Watson does in his book, I have been helped a great deal from his book, and will make much use of it as we go through the closing verses of this chapter.

This morning we will be briefly looking *first* at *the remnant of the Lord*; *second*, the *reverence (or fear)* of the Lord; and *third*, the *regard* of the Lord for His remnant.

### ***The Remnant of the Lord***

The *first* thing that we see in our text is that no matter how bad things may get, *God graciously preserves a faithful remnant of his people*. In v.16 Malachi tells us:

**“Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.”**

After everything that we have seen so far in the book of Malachi, we might be tempted to think that all was lost, and that **“pure and undefiled”** religion before God (James 1:27) had become extinct among Israel. But that was not the case. *As always, God preserves for Himself a faithful remnant.*

Do you remember the story of the prophet Elijah? At one his lowest points (which came after one of his greatest victories), he began to think that *he alone* was left in serving God.

<sup>1</sup> The title of this sermon is borrowed from the title of Thomas Watson's book, *The Great Gain of Godliness*.

<sup>2</sup> All Scripture quotations are from the English Standard Version (ESV) unless otherwise noted.

God found Elijah hiding for his life in a cave, and asked him why he was there. In 1 Kings 19:10 Elijah says to God:

**“I have been very jealous for the LORD, the God of hosts. For the people of Israel have forsaken your covenant, thrown down your altars, and killed your prophets with the sword, and I, even I only, am left, and they seek my life, to take it away.”**

And what was God's reply? *First*, He tells Elijah that *help was on the way*. He was told to **“anoint Hazael to be king over Syria”** (v.15), and anoint *Jehu* as king over Israel, and (last but not least) to anoint *Elisha* to be prophet in his place (v.16)! And those three would be used by God to destroy his enemies in due time.

And although his enemies were seeking his life **“to take it away”** (v.10), it was *the LORD Himself* who would instead **“take”** Elijah home to heaven with **“chariots of fire and horses of fire”** and a whirlwind (2 Kings 2:11)! The Hebrew word for **“taken”** there in 2 Kings 2:10 is the same Hebrew word (נָטַל) that Elijah used back in 1 Kings 19:10, when he spoke of his fear that the wicked would **“take”** his life away.

But *what else* did God tell Elijah in his time of trial and near despair? In 1 Kings 19:18 He says, **“Yet I will leave seven thousand in Israel, all the knees that have not bowed to Baal, and every mouth that has not kissed him.”** Elijah was *not* the only one left. Why not? Because as Paul puts it in Romans 11:4, God had *reserved* or **“kept”** for Himself seven thousand men who had not bowed the knee to Baal! *God preserved for Himself a remnant.*

Even so *in Malachi's day*, and *in our own day as well*, no matter how bad things may get, no matter how few in the visible church seem to be truly serving God; no matter how many pastors seem to be unfaithful in teaching their flocks the whole counsel of God; no matter how many churches seem to have degenerated to the point of having *their lampstands removed* (Revelation 2:5) and becoming nothing but *synagogues of Satan* (Revelation 2:9; *Westminster Confession of Faith* 25.5); nevertheless God has reserved for Himself a remnant, and Christ is still building His church!

After everything that we have seen so far in the book of Malachi, it would have been very easy for the faithful remnant in Israel to have gotten discouraged. Certainly they were aware of the iniquity, hypocrisy and apostasy that were all around them in the land. Perhaps they were tempted to despair or to even throw in their lot with those who said it was vain to serve the Lord (v.13).

### ***The Reverence (or Fear) of the Lord***

But that is not what they did, is it? Quite the opposite, actually! In v.16 we are told: **“Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another.”** They did not give in to despair. They did not give up. They did not join in with those who spoke evil of God.

And why not? Because they **“feared the LORD.”** The implication is that those who spoke evil of God and said that it was **“vain”** to serve him essentially did *not* fear the Lord. To fear God rightly as the Bible often exhorts us to do is *not* having a slavish terror of God, but to have a love and a deep reverence for Him as a child does for his or her father.

The fear of God will serve as a *restraint against sin*. Proverbs 16:6 tell us, **“by the fear of the LORD one turns away from evil.”** Job 1:1 says, **“There was a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job, and that man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.”** Fearing God and turning away from evil go together; the former leads to the latter.

Very often the Scriptures link fearing God together with keeping His commandments. Ecclesiastes 12:13 says, **“The end of the matter; all has been heard. *Fear God and keep his commandments, for this is the whole duty of man.*”**

The fear of the Lord will serve as a *restraint against speaking evil of God*. The unrepentant thief on the cross **“railed at”** our Lord Jesus Christ and said, **“Are you not the Christ? Save yourself and us!”** (Luke 23:39) And what was the other thief's reply? He *rebuked* him and said **“Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed justly, for we are receiving the due reward of our deeds; but this man has done nothing wrong.”** (v.40-41)

The work of God's saving grace in that condemned criminal's life was already becoming evident, even at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour! He owned his own sin and guilt before God; he was zealous to defend the honor of Christ's name; and he even believed that Jesus, despite hanging on the cross right next to him, was indeed the Christ! In Luke 23:42–43 we are even told:

**“And he said, “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom.” And he said to him, “Truly, I say to you, today you will be with me in paradise.””**

*Just look at the faith of that man!* He believed that Jesus, even while He was dying on the cross for our sins, was the long-awaited Messiah and King, and that He was still going to come into His kingdom! And our Lord Jesus, who **“came to seek and to save the lost”** (Luke 19:10), snatched a soul that was *moments away from an eternity in Hell*, and promised him a place in **“paradise”** with Him forever!

Those who do not fear God will not refrain from speaking evil and blasphemous things of God when things don't go their way. But the fear of God will lead a child of God to be zealous to defend the honor of His name, even in times of trial or difficulty.

We will learn to say, with Job, **“Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked shall I return. The LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD.”** (Job 1:21) Not only did Job *worship God* (v.20) after he lost everything, but He blessed God and in v.22 it says, **“In all this Job did not sin or charge God with wrong.”**

Let us imitate the faith of the godly in Malachi's day, who feared the Lord, esteemed His name, and met together to converse of the things of God! This is what the writer of the book of Hebrews exhorts us to do, is it not? In Hebrews 10:23–25 we read:

**“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”**

As he says, **“Let us hold fast the confession of our hope”** together, no matter what others around us may be doing. Let us seek to *stir ourselves and each other up* **“to love and good works”** and make it our habit to **“meet together”** for *worship*, and to *encourage each other in the faith!*

That is what the faithful remnant who feared the Lord did in Malachi's day! They gathered together to talk about the things of God! They sought to stir each other up in the fear and service of God when so many of those all around them were going through the motions of hypocritical religion, speaking evil of God, and blaspheming His name!

### ***The Regard of the LORD for His Remnant***

The third and last thing that we see in our text today is *the regard of the Lord* for His faithful remnant. They spoke with each other in the fear of God, and no doubt they greatly encouraged each other in the faith. But there was something else that Malachi would have us notice – *that God Himself took notice of it!*

In v.16 we read:

***“Then those who feared the LORD spoke with one another. The LORD paid attention and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the LORD and esteemed his name.”***

The Lord “**paid attention**” or *took notice*. The KJV says that the LORD “**hearkened, and heard it.**” What an encouragement to know that God notices. Your service in His name that perhaps no one else sees? *God notices it*. Your time on your knees in prayer in secret? *God notices it and hears it*, and will answer and reward you in due time.

The Word of God is full of passages that speak of someone doing good or doing evil “in the eyes of the Lord.” In the first commandment God tells us that we are to have no other Gods *before Him*, that is, in His sight. *Westminster Shorter Catechism* Q/A 48 tells us that those words “**before me**” in Exodus 20:3 “teach us, that God, who seeth all things, taketh notice of, and is much displeased with, the sin of having any other god.”

But not only does God see all, and take notice of all sin, iniquity, and blasphemy, but He also takes notice of His people who fear Him and esteem His great name. 2 Chronicles 16:9 says:

***“For the eyes of the LORD run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to give strong support to those whose heart is blameless toward him.”***

God sees all things and knows all things. But He is also actively *on the lookout* (so to speak) to “**give strong support**” to those who fear Him and seek to walk before Him blamelessly in Christ!

Remember *the example of the Hebrew midwives* in the book of Exodus! They were ordered to kill the male infants of the Hebrew women at birth (Exodus 1:16). (The abomination of abortion is not a recent invention!) But we are told of *Shiphrah and Puah* (v.15 – God recorded their names in Scripture!) that they “**feared God and did not do as the king of Egypt commanded them, but let the male children live.**” (Exodus 1:17)

They feared God rather than man, and so they obeyed God rather than men! And in v.20-21 it says:

***“So God dealt well with the midwives. And the people multiplied and grew very strong. And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families.”***

They feared God and God regarded them, and rewarded them for it in due time! The Hebrew midwives learned that it was *not* vain to serve God! And we should learn from their example of faith and the fear of the Lord!

God *regards* those who are zealous for the glory of His name. He regards our words of praise and encouragement that we utter, even if it seems like we utter them in a distant and lonely corner.

God *regards* those who fear Him; He *hears* the words we say in praise of His name and in defense of His honor. And He also (as it were) *records* us in His **“book of remembrance.”** That means that even though His reward may not be apparent right away, it is sure to come! He will not forget!

That is why Hebrews 11:6 says, **“And without faith it is impossible to please him, for whoever would draw near to God must believe that he exists and that he rewards those who seek him.”** It takes faith to live that way and to draw near unto God, seeking Him!

## **Conclusion**

You may be wondering how it is that God, who sees all, can possibly regard, record, and reward the love and good works of His people. After all, nothing that we ever do in this life is free from the stain of sin. Watson offers three reasons why “God takes such notice of his people's services.”

“First [He does so] *not from any merit in them*, but the impulsive cause is his free grace. The best duties of the righteous could not endure the scales of justice, but God will display the trophies of his mercy. Free grace accepts what justice might condemn.

Secondly, God's taking notice of the good in his people is *through Christ*: 'He hath made us accepted in the beloved' (Eph. 1:6). . . .<sup>3</sup>

*Thirdly*, God takes notice of the services of his people, *because they flow from the principle of grace.*”<sup>4</sup>

That last point reminds us of the words of Philippians 2:13 which tells us that **“it is God who works in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”** As it has been said, in rewarding the sincere good works of His people, however imperfect both we and they may be, God is simply *crowning His own gifts and graces!*

May we fear God and esteem His name in our generation, trusting that our God regards us by His grace in Christ, and will graciously reward us in His time. To Him be the glory through Jesus Christ. -Amen

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<sup>3</sup> *Westminster Confession of Faith* 16.6 likewise says: “Notwithstanding, the persons of believers being accepted through Christ, their good works also are accepted in him; not as though they were in this life wholly unblamable and unreprouvable in God's sight; but that he, looking upon them in his Son, is pleased to accept and reward that which is sincere, although accompanied with many weaknesses and imperfections.

<sup>4</sup> *The Great Gain of Godliness*, p.96 (Banner of Truth)