

Malachi 3:13-18 (NIV)

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?’ 15 But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.” 16 Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. 17 “They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. 18 And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

39-03-01-Have We Degraded God’s Grace?

prevenient grace, godly fear, Lent, mercy, grace, judgment
Mal 3:13-18

God’s judgment is determined by our response to His grace.

INTRODUCTION: (text as Scripture reading)

–The questions raised in this Lenten series of sermons on Malachi have hopefully opened our hearts to self-examination. This last one (**title**) shows how God’s moral examination of our lives is inseparable from His divine grace, because **HOM.idea**.

–In the usual “*Malachi*” pattern, God begins by *accusing His people* and by *anticipating their reply*– **v.13-15**, “*You have said harsh things against me,*” says the LORD. “*Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’ ‘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? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.’*” Before we look at God’s instructive answer to this reply, we must ask if it expresses a question we ourselves may sometimes ask....

- I. “Why Does God Allow the Wicked to Prosper?”** (a question often asked in conjunction with another: “**Why do the innocent suffer?**”)
- A.** These are *old* questions; they’ve been asked before...
1. **by Job, when he’d lost** his children, his property, and his health– **Job 21:17-20**, “Yet how often is the lamp of the wicked snuffed out? How often does calamity come upon them, the fate God allots in his anger? How often are they like straw before the wind, like chaff swept away by a gale? It is said, ‘God stores up a man’s punishment for his sons.’ Let him repay the man himself, so that he will know it! Let his own eyes see his destruction; let him drink of the wrath of the Almighty.”
 2. **by Asaph, in Psalms 73:3, 8-14**, For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked.... They scoff, and speak with malice; in their arrogance they threaten oppression. Their mouths lay claim to heaven, and their tongues take possession of the earth. Therefore their people turn to them and drink up waters in abundance. They say, “How can God know? Does the Most High have knowledge?” This is what the wicked are like—always carefree, they increase in wealth. [*then, in contrast, Asaph says,*] Surely in vain have I kept my heart pure; in vain have I washed my hands in innocence. All day long I have been plagued; I have been punished every morning.
- B.** These questions arose in Malachi’s day among those returned from captivity, who still suffered under foreign powers– **v.15b**, *Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.*

- C. These same questions are used today by *skeptics* to challenge the Christian faith: “*If God is all-loving and all-powerful, then why doesn’t He stop the injustices of the wicked?*” (But skeptics fails to consider 3 important factors: the *will*, the *world* and *divine grace*:
1. God made humans with real freedom to choose whether or not to have an authentic relationship with Him. (We’re *not robots*, but enabled by free will to say “*YES!*” or “*NO!*” to Him. But humans *can* change their choices, and God often waits a long time for it.)
 2. God gave us a real world, where good and bad choices become tangible actions that help or harm others. [“*No man is an island*” and “*All the world’s a stage*”; each person’s part effects the whole drama, which is played out in a real interrelated world.] (“*Can one person’s sin really effect everything else?*” Look at how the original creation now groans under the curse of Adam’s sin, while both it and we ourselves long for liberation from disorder, decay, and death.)
 3. The 3rd factor is grace: God *graciously* shows *undeserved favor* even to the wicked— Mat 5:45, ...your Father in heaven...causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the just and the unjust. [This is Prevenient grace (*coming before* salvation) to lead us to repent— Rom 2:4. Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?]

TRANS: Why does God hold off judging the wicked?— 2 Pet 3:9b, He is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance. God sometimes waits with great patience to see our response to His grace. Listen to His instructive answer to their questioning reply— v.16-18, *Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name. “They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. Judgment is not just future. It’s being determined right now in how we respond to God’s grace....*

II. “What is the Proper Response to the LORD God Almighty?”

- A. Mal 3:16 is a favorite verse of mine; it’s a window on what takes place in Heaven’s Executive Office; it shows God is interested in the conversations of *those who feared the LORD and honored his name*.

1. In Prov 9:10a it says, The fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom. (We can talk all day about political problems here and abroad and never get God’s attention. But when wisdom from godly fear guides our discussion, *God listens, and even has it recorded!*)
 2. God is concerned that His people honor his name in their speech (Malachi repeated “*the LORD God Almighty*” 20 times for just that emphasis.) [George Herbert, a Puritan poet, made it a practice to identify his devotion by adding “*My Master*” each time he said the name of Christ....]
- B. God’s grace abounds toward everyone, but how it rebounds from the heart, by a person’s proper response to it, determines human destiny— v.17 “*They will be mine,*” *says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him. (Taking seriously what grace can do forms the proper heart response— Psa 130:4.* But with you there is forgiveness; therefore you are feared.)

CONCLUSION:

—When *the wicked prosper, beating down the innocent and helpless*, such injustices can occupy our focus till “doomsday.” But the point is: doomsday is coming— v.18 *And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not. Until that Day, we should take God’s patience with the wicked as our cue to join Him in prayer for their repentance and for our own, when needed.*

—Those who’ve *feared the LORD and honored his name* have the right focus: *personally* accessing the full benefits of His grace, which puts us *right with God* and enables us to *serve Him* now and for the rest of eternity.

—**Judgment is determined by our response to His grace.** Closing with a quote from C. S. Lewis: “When the author walks on to the stage the play is over. God is going to invade, all right: but what is the good of saying you are on His side then, when you see the whole natural universe melting away like a dream and something else - something it never entered your head to conceive - comes crashing in; something so beautiful to some of us and so terrible to others that none of us will have any choice left? For this time it will be God without disguise; something so overwhelming that it will strike either irresistible love or irresistible horror into every creature. It will be too late then to choose your side. There is no use saying you choose to lie down when it has become impossible to stand up. That will not be the time for choosing; it will be the time when we discover which side we really have chosen, whether we realised it before or not. Now, today, this moment, is our chance to choose the right side. God is holding back to give us that chance. It will not last for ever. We must take it or leave it.”