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C1404 – January 29, 2014 – Malachi 3:6-12
God's Immutability

Turn to Malachi 3. It's been mentioned to me on a couple of occasions since last week that the discussion of John vs Elijah was a difficult one and perhaps we could go through it again. It is a difficult issue to get your arms around and we probably can't get our arms totally around it because ultimately it's incomprehensible. But Scripturally what you can do is interpret individual passages within their own individual contexts and then at the end of that process go through the rigor of bringing the passages together in a harmony. The Scriptures are a harmony but we can't try to link passages in a harmony until we have exhausted the exegesis of individual passages. What we're looking at contextually in Malachi 3:1-5 is God's response to the question the priests posed in 2:17, "Where is the God of justice?" It appeared to them that the scales of justice were at this time tipped in favor of the wicked. Therefore they declared that evil was now good in the eyes of the LORD. By teaching this false doctrine they were wearying the LORD and not taking into account that they were living in a day of grace before judgment. God's response in 3:1-5 is essentially that during the period of grace He is storing up wrath for the future day of judgment. In this period of judgment God will demonstrate that He is just by recompensing men for their deeds. To Daniel it was revealed that this Day of Judgment was the 70th seven of years on Israel's calendar. The calendar began with the decree of Artaxerxes on March 5, 444BC to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem. The first 69 sevens of years were completed at the Triumphal Entry of Christ on March 30, AD33. A gap of time between the 69th seven of years and the 70th seven of years exists during which the Christ would be crucified and the city of Jerusalem and the Temple destroyed. The 70th seven of years will begin when the anti-Christ forces a treaty on the leadership of Israel promising them security. It's that 70th seven of years that God appeals to in Mal 3:1-5 as the time that will reveal that He is the God of justice.

During this time in verse 1 God will first send His messenger before Him. His purpose will be to clear the way before the Lord. To clear the way refers to the removing of all hindrances so the Lord can come. The hindrance to the Lord's coming is the unbelief of the nation. Israel's unbelief is in a very real sense, hindering the Lord from coming to establish His kingdom. This messenger, whom we identified as Elijah, looking ahead at 4:5-6, will be successful in turning the nation Israel to belief in the Lord. He is therefore quite probably one of the two witnesses that will come. When his ministry is successful the Lord will suddenly come to His temple and herald the new covenant. In this covenant God promised to put His Spirit within the nation Israel so that they will be able to obey Him and dwell peacefully and securely in the kingdom. In verse 2 His justice and power in judgment will be so immense that one wonders who will be able to survive His perfect discrimination. For, verse 3, He will be like a refiner who separates the dross from the pure ore and like a laundryman's soap which separates impurities from the pure cloth. The judgment will purify for Himself the sons of Levi so that they can serve in His Temple. It will also separate the remnant from the non-remnant. In verse 4, at long last the Levitical offerings will be pleasing to Him as they had been in the ancient days of David and Solomon. In verse 5, those who will not be able to withstand the judgment are the non-remnant of Jews who committed the theological sin of not fearing the LORD and therefore committed all the social sins listed in this representative verse. The answer then, to the question, "Where is the God of justice?" is that He is coming. But first He will send His messenger Elijah to turn the nation from unbelief to belief. When his ministry has been sufficiently successful the Lord Himself will return and remove any remaining rebels. Then He will rule in His kingdom. So the contextual interpretation of the messenger in 3:1 is that he is Elijah, the one who will come during the future 70th seven of years revealed to Daniel.

Now when the NT begins these last words are on the minds of the nation Israel. They also knew, or should have known, that they were living in the fourth Gentile kingdom revealed through Daniel. So the stage was set in their minds for Elijah to come and restore all things. This is why, when John comes and carries out his ministry, calling the nation to "Repent, for the kingdom of God is at hand," that some of the leaders considered that John might be Elijah. Jesus quoted Mal 3:1a and applied it to John, saying in Matt 11:10, "BEHOLD, I SEND MY MESSENGER AHEAD OF YOU, WHO WILL

PREPARE YOUR WAY BEFORE YOU...” and in 11:14, “And if you are willing to accept it, John himself is Elijah who was to come.” In other words, Jesus admits that Elijah was the subject of the OT prophecies. But Jesus also teaches that if they accept Him as their king then John is Elijah and so John would fulfill the OT prophecies. In other words, what Jesus was teaching was that the offer of the kingdom was a genuine offer. If they accepted Him as their king then John would have been Elijah and he would have fulfilled all OT prophecies concerning him. This may seem strange but what Jesus is preserving is the idea that history and human decisions in history are real and significant decisions. From the human standpoint history, we say, is contingent on human choices. John truly would have been Elijah and the kingdom truly would have come, if they had accepted Jesus as their king. However, in Matthew 12 the nation rejected Jesus as their king and consequently the kingdom offer begins to gradually withdraw. Thus Jesus said to them later in Matt 17:11 “Elijah is coming and will restore all things; 12but I say to you that Elijah already came, and they did not recognize him, but did to him whatever they wished.” In other words, their failure to recognize that John was Elijah if they had recognized him resulted in the fact that John was not Elijah. Therefore Elijah is still to come and when he comes he will restore all things. But again, you see, the offer of the kingdom to Israel was a genuine offer and if they had recognized John he would have been Elijah and the kingdom would have come. But because they did not and they did to him whatever they wished the kingdom was not coming at this time.

The John/Elijah issue is a case study in divine sovereignty and human responsibility. John truly could have come and fulfilled the function of Elijah and thus fulfilled the prophecies that predict Elijah’s coming. As it was, however, John was not Elijah but he did come in the spirit and power of Elijah. This helps resolve the tension between divine sovereignty and human responsibility because it shows us that, on one hand, God has a sovereign plan. From his vantage point the end has been declared from the beginning. He was not surprised when the nation did not recognize John. He was not caught off guard when the nation did not accept the kingdom offer. He knew they would not. However, John could have been Elijah and the offer of the kingdom was a genuine offer. Had the nation received John he would have been Elijah and the kingdom would have come. Both are true. It’s not one or the other, it’s both. The problem in our mind is how to get the two together.

The only thing I can tell you is that you have to humbly accept that both are true because the Bible teaches both, and the reason we can't understand it is because His ways are not our ways. He is not subject to cause effect within the created order as we are; therefore His ways are ultimately unfathomable. A good dose of humble acceptance of creature hood will go a long way in not falling off the cliff in either direction such that we affirm divine sovereignty on one hand and deny human responsibility on the other or we deny divine sovereignty on one hand and affirm human responsibility on the other. Both are equally true. To affirm one and deny the other is to make nonsense out of the statements of Scripture. But to affirm both does justice to the statements of Scripture.

Numerous difficulties fit into the same mold as the John/Elijah issue. For example, is it true that God knows from all eternity who will be saved? If He knows who will be saved can anyone be saved that He does not know about? And is it also true that whosoever believes in Him will be saved? But if He knows who will be saved and who will not be then is the offer of salvation to someone who will not be therefore not a genuine offer? By no means. Both must be maintained as true. Paul's shipwreck, Judah's betrayal and many other difficulties are explained by this humble acceptance of twin truths. In conclusion, God has a plan from all eternity and human choices in time are genuine and significant in bringing that plan to pass. Any questions?

Alright, today in Malachi 3:6 we come to the fifth disputation. God is disputing with the nation Israel through Malachi regarding several violations of the Mosaic covenant which had resulted in God cursing them in accordance with His word in Lev 26 and Deut 28. The purpose of these disputations is to convince them of their sin so they would confess their sin and be restored to covenant blessing. Each disputation follows, for the most part, the common triad formula; a statement of truth, a questioning of the truth and a proof of the truth. As usual the LORD begins with a statement of truth in 3:6. The NASB translates, "**For I, the LORD, do not change.**" The **For** is a translation attempting to link verse 6 with the prior disputation instead of the beginning of the next one. However, the prior disputation ends nicely with the close of verse 5, "thus says the LORD of armies." So verse 6 seems to be a new disputation, especially when one notices that the Hebrew conjunction translated **For** (*ki*) can legitimately be translated "indeed" or "surely." It would introduce a strong assertion of the truth that the LORD

does not change. It should therefore be translated, “Indeed, I, the LORD, do not change.” This truth was apparently challenged by the Israelites. It is the clearest and most important reference to God’s attribute of immutability.

What do we mean by immutability? This attribute means that God’s character is forever perfectly stable. The key word in that description is “character.” His character never changes. We say this because the Bible also states a number of times that God changed His mind (e.g. Exod 32:14). But if God never changes then how can God change His mind? The key is in isolating immutability to God’s character and not His choices. God never changes in His essential character but He can change His choices in a given situation, so long as His choices are consistent with His character. This is vital to maintain for on one hand, if God changed His character then He would be a capricious, arbitrary God, unable to be trusted and on the other hand, if He did not change His choices in situations involving responsible creatures then He would not be a cold, unresponsive statue in heaven. So we must maintain that God’s character never changes but His choices can change as long as the change is consistent with His character. Put another way, God is always sovereign, righteous, just, loving, omniscient, etc...but God’s choices relative to His creation can change as long as the choices are consistent with His sovereignty, righteousness, justice, love, omniscience, etc...

Now the result of the truth that **the LORD** does **not change** in His character in verse 6 is that **you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed**. Technically this is synthetic parallelism where the second thought completes the first. The first thought is the cause, the second thought is the effect. Cause; the LORD’s character never changes; effect; the sons of Jacob are not consumed. Now the mention of **Jacob** reminds us of the incident when Jacob wrestled with a strange man in Gen 32. He persisted in wrestling with him all night until morning. At the last the man touched his hip socket so that he was incapacitated. And yet Jacob continued to hold on to him and insisted that he would not let him go until he had blessed him. At that time the man blessed him by renaming him Israel which means, “wrestles with God.” Now Jacob’s experience of wrestling until receiving a blessing was a foreview of the pattern that the sons of Jacob’s would follow. They too would wrestle with God until He blessed them. Their experience from Mt Sinai on was one of continual wrestling by violating His statutes. While such violations brought

cursing upon them fortunately for the **sons of Jacob** the **LORD** does **not change**. He had made a covenant with Abraham to ultimately bless him and his offspring through Isaac and Jacob. Therefore no matter how long the sons of Jacob wrestled with Him, eventually God would bless them because He is immutable.

Verse 7 describes their continual wrestling with Him, **From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from My statutes and have not kept them**. The history of the nation had a long history of wrestling against God's statutes as outlined in the Mosaic covenant. If we have learned anything from the Minor Prophets it is that the prophets were prosecuting attorneys acting on God's behalf, bringing lawsuits against the nation for their violations of the Law. Each time the case was adjudicated in favor of the prosecution and the prophets announced the cursings. These cursing had already been revealed by God in Lev 26 and Deut 28 so they should not have been surprised. The purpose of the cursings was disciplinary with the intent to restore. God wanted the nation to come back to Him and learn loyalty to Him so that they would become a distinct nation among all the nations on the earth and serve as a kingdom of priests mediating between God and these nations. Verse 7 shows that their history was one big failure to learn loyalty to Him and consequently they had not become what God intended them to be.

God's instruction to remedy this situation is verse 7b. **“Return to Me, and I will return to you,” says the LORD of hosts**. They need to take the initiative and **return**. The Hebrew word *sub* is the 12th most common verb used in the OT. It means to have a change of mind about the direction one is going and to turn and go the other direction. It is the human responsibility in the situation. They were going away from God by disobeying His statutes, they needed to have a change of mind about disobeying His statutes and turn to go toward Him by obeying His statutes. If they would do this then He would return to them by blessing them. So in a very real sense God had turned His back on them by cursing them because they had turned their back on Him. But if they would turn toward Him He would turn toward them by restoring the blessing.

At the end of verse 7 they question the truth that it was necessary to return to Him by asking, **How shall we return?** Their point is how shall we return to a place we have never left? In other words, we never left You in the first

place so how can we return to You? They are ignorant as to how they have disobeyed His statutes. Or at least they are playing ignorant; in which case it shows they are reluctant to change their ways. In any case it seems that it is necessary to prove to them that indeed they had turned away from Him and needed to return. Therefore in verse 8 a particular sin is pointed out that proves that they had turned aside from Him.

Will a man rob God? He asks. Yet you are robbing Me? This is just another of many accusations made against the priests and the people in Malachi. They had turned away from Him in many ways; they had failed to trust that God loved them; they had failed to offer proper sacrifices, they had failed to remain faithful to their wives and they had failed to maintain that God is just. There were many ways in which they had left Him and the prophet has already mentioned these. But here he picks up a new sin that adds to the threatening message of the book.

He asks in verse 8, **Will a man rob God?** Who would dare to commit theft against God? One who robs another does so when another is absent. Yet God is in all places simultaneously. Therefore to rob God is to assume that God is absent. Surely then to try and rob God is to reveal that you have a distorted view of God. Just as Adam tried to do the impossible, hide from God, so they tried to rob God without Him knowing, another impossibility. **Yet** he states, **you are robbing Me! How have we robbed You?** They ask, **In tithes and offerings.** They were keeping back a portion of the tithe that was to go to the Temple and the Levites in order to maintain proper worship. The consequences, as we have seen earlier, were that improper sacrifices were being offered. Now probably there is no passage more preached by Protestant and Catholic when it's time to build a new building than Malachi 3:8. Christians who don't tithe are put under the guilt trip of robbing God of what is rightfully due Him. But this grave error rests on a basic failure to recognize distinct dispensations in the plan of God. The nation Israel is a distinct nation that always had a physical temple where the Lord dwelled whereas the Church is a distinct people that are a spiritual temple wherein the Lord dwells. As such the nation Israel always has a physical temple, in past ages and in the age to come, and this temple and its worship is supported by a series of required tithes. To not pay the required tithe was to rob God by neglecting His house. But the Church has no physical temple, instead the Church itself is a spiritual temple composed of individual

believers. Their responsibility is revealed in Gal 6:6-10 and 2 Cor 8-9 as voluntary giving to support ministers and aid other believers in time of need. The Church has no external, physical temple requiring a tithe. So the main reason this verse cannot be applied to the Church is because it is written to the nation Israel to accuse them of failing to support the physical temple supported by required tithes. The Church has no such requirement.

Now there were three tithes or tenths in OT Israel; tithe means tenth and it was a tax. The first tithe was an annual tax of ten percent. It was calculated on the basis of the families land production for that year. Each family within a tribe was given a plot of land. The land itself was not taxed because it was considered an asset. So they truly owned their property. The only thing that was taxed was the produce of the land. So they'd take 10% of their annual income and it was designated for the tribe of Levi. The reason is because God designated the tribe of Levi to serve Him in His Temple and so He didn't give them any land during the time of the settlement. So to be supported the other tribes gave 10% of their annual produce to them. The second tithe was also an annual tax of ten percent. It was also calculated on the basis of the family's land production for that year. So they'd take another 10% of their annual income and it was designated for one big party in Jerusalem every year. You were to go up and spend 10% on anything you want, just enjoy the Lord. It was a big splurge but you were to trust the Lord and just have a good time. So the first and second tithe add up to 20% a year. The third tithe was not an annual tithe but an every third year tithe. It too was another 10 and so on average it worked out to be 3 1/3% annually. It was designated to go to the Levites that lived in your hometown and the foreigners and orphans and widows. So it was a local tax every third year.

Now it's these three taxes, and probably the two that are more directly related to the temple, that God in verse 8 is accusing them of failing to provide. And by doing so they were **robbing** Him. Therefore, verse 9, **You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing Me, the whole nation of you!** So this is very clearly an accusation leveled at the **whole nation** and not just the priests. If the whole nation failed to bring in the whole tithe to the temple storehouse then the Levites and priests would not have a sufficient amount to adequately support themselves or the temple worship. As such the entire worship system would break down. In the law if they failed to obey God then they would be **cursed** for their disobedience. Robbing

God was disobedience. The Temple was his house and He is a great King. His servants should be adequately supported and the food put on His table should be of the highest quality available. To not do this is to rob Him of what rightfully belongs to Him because He is the one who blessed them in the first place by giving them their land, animals and produce. Therefore on the most fundamental level it all belonged to Him anyway. Therefore they should give to Him and His house that which He requested.

This is His instruction in verse 10, **“Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house, and test Me now in this,”** says the LORD of hosts, **“if I will not open for you the windows of heaven and pour out for you a blessing until it overflows.** On the other side of the curse was the blessing. In order to return to Him in verse 7, such that He would return to them, they needed to **bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.** There was a designated room in the Temple known as **the storehouse.** Food and other supplies for the Levites and priests were stored in this room (Neh 10:38-39). This storeroom, we can imagine, was inadequately stocked as we can see from the second phrase in verse 10, **so that there may be food in My house.** Because of this verse some people have adopted another error regarding tithing called “storehouse giving.” Proponents of storehouse tithing argue that a Christian should bring their gift only to the church building which they take as the storehouse. Some go so far as to say that a Christian should not bypass the local church by giving directly to missionaries or other believers in need. This again fails to see the clear distinction between Israel and her physical Temple and the Church as a spiritual temple. Israel had a designated physical temple where they brought their tithe to support the Temple and its work. The Church is a spiritual temple, so to give to a missionary or other needy believer directly is not bypassing any designated place we are to give our gifts. Few would be able to go so far as to say that the local church building is where a minister must live and that the tithe was to go directly to him so he could have food. Yet that would be the logical conclusion from this text. However, for the Levites it was this way, they had no land and therefore had no way to get food other than the tithes brought in by the other tribes and put into the storehouse.

Now in the middle of the verse the LORD tells them to **test Him now.** This is interesting because there are two kinds of testing the LORD in Scripture.

The first kind of test is evil. Do not put the Lord your God to the test. This kind of testing originates with a creature and challenges the Creator to prove His existence or verify His word. For example, in Judges 6:36-40 Gideon put out the fleece of wool and said to God, if there is dew on the fleece only and it is dry on the ground then I will know that what you have said is true. He then went on to test Him again. This kind of test requiring that the LORD do something in order to prove He or His word is true is an evil kind of testing. We should never put God to the test in this way. However, the second kind of test is good. This kind of testing originates with God and is inviting Him to confirm His promises are true. One example is here. God tells them to **test** Him. God had promised to pour out blessing on them if they obeyed the Law. They should test Him by bringing **the whole tithe into the storehouse**. If they did the end of verse 10 says He would **open for them the windows of heaven and pour out for them a blessing until it overflows**. Under the principles of the Mosaic Law, again Lev 26 and Deut 28, the LORD would bless them for blessing Him and curse them for cursing Him. He is challenging them to test Him by blessing Him by following His Law. If they blessed Him then He would bless them. This kind of test which originates with God and invites Him to confirm His promises is a good way to test the Lord.

The kind of blessing where he **opens the windows of heaven and pours out blessing** clearly refers to abundant rainfall that will bring forth an abundance of crops. In an agricultural society an abundance of crops translates to a thriving economy. This was part of the promised blessing for obedience in Lev 26 and Deut 28.

In verse 11, furthermore, if they did test Him by bringing the whole tithe into the storehouse, **“Then“** He says, **“I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of the ground; nor will your vine in the field cast its grapes,”** says the LORD of hosts. The **devourer** refers to the crop pests that work their way into the fields and **destroy the fruits**. God is saying that if they brought the whole tithe in he would remove these pests from destroying their crops. Further he says their **vine in the field** would not **cast its grapes**, that is, to drop its fruit prematurely so it could not be enjoyed. Both pests and premature dropping are curses on the land listed in Lev 26 and Deut 28. The Lord said in Lev 26:20, “your land will not yield its produce and the trees of the land will not yield their fruit.” In Deut

28:38-39 the Lord said, “You will bring out much seed to the field but you will gather in little, for the locust will consume it. 39You shall plant and cultivate vineyards, but you will neither drink of the wine nor gather the grapes, for the worm will devour them. You shall have olive trees throughout your territory but you will not anoint yourself with oil, for your olives will drop off.” The point is that God would reverse the curses and turn them into blessing if they tested Him as He requested by bringing the whole tithe into the Temple storeroom.

Verse 12 closes reminiscent of the opening verse 6 where God states that His character is immutable therefore you O sons of Jacob are not consumed. He says here, “**All the nations will call you blessed, for you shall be a delightful land,**” says the **LORD of hosts**. Ultimately God will bless the sons of Jacob because He promised to in the Abrahamic Covenant. However, for the Abrahamic Covenant to be fulfilled the nation must return to Him. This prospect was put forth multiple times in other prophet’s days, as well as Malachi’s day and in the days of the NT. The offer to Israel to enjoy her kingdom blessings under the Abrahamic Covenant, again, is a genuine offer. If they will return to God, He will return to them. When they do He will turn the curse into blessing and, as verse 12 says, **All the nations will call you blessed**. To be called blessed means to conclude that another’s situation is more desirable than one’s own. The nations in the millennial kingdom will call Israel blessed because Israel’s situation will be more desirable than any other nations. To call their **land a delightful** one is to say it is a joy to inhabit it. During the kingdom the land of Israel will be a delightful land to live in because of the agricultural abundance, peace and security they will enjoy. These are not references to heaven but to earth and the prosperity Israel will enjoy in the millennial kingdom. Of course it will not only be a time of materialism but it will also be a time of heightened spirituality because God will place His Spirit within them so that they obey Him. To have material blessing is not contrary to spirituality. Therefore a millennial kingdom where Israel is the head and the other nations are the tail and Israel enjoys greater material blessing than others is not contrary to spirituality. The real truth is that Israel in the kingdom will experience both material and spiritual blessing because verse 6, God does not change. He made promises and He will fulfill those promises. Even though the sons of Jacob continue today to wrestle with God, a day is coming when He will

injure them to the point that they finally ask for the blessing. At that time He will pour out His blessing upon them.

In summary, in verse 6, we have a statement of truth that the LORD does not change in His essential character; the effect of this truth is that the sons of Jacob are not consumed. In verse 7 they had wrestled with Him by turning aside from His statutes as their father Jacob had wrestled with Him in search of the blessing. The way to the blessing is to return to Him. They had turned away from Him but they questioned the truth that they had turned from Him by asking, "How shall we return?" If they had not turned from Him how could they return? The Lord answers how they had turned from Him in verse 8 by accusing them of robbing Him. They question the accusation that they had robbed him but he answers that they had fallen short in their tithes and offerings. As a result in verse 9 they were cursed with a curse, the whole nation had failed to bring in the whole tithe. The remedy is verse 10, "bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in My house." The LORD challenges them to test Him in this and see if the Lord would not open up the floodgates of the heavens and pour forth rain producing agricultural and economic abundance. Such abundance would necessarily be accompanied by verse 11, the removal of all crop pests that destroy the fruits of the ground and premature dropping of grapes which leave the laborer quenched of the bounty from his field. When they return to Him, in verse 12, all the nations of the earth will wish they had the situation Israel has. The whole land of Israel will be called a delightful land. What a changing attitude the world is going to have toward Israel and the land at this future time. But it all hinges on Israel's return to the Lord. Again, John came and tried to get the nation to return, they did not, Elijah is coming, when he comes they will return. Then the King will come heralding the new covenant and kingdom blessing will at last arrive and all the nations will have a very different attitude toward Israel.

In conclusion what can we learn? First, that God in His essential character does not change. This is the reason that the nation Israel still exists. If Israel ceases to exist then God has undergone an essential change. Since this is impossible Israel will always be around. The problem today that is blocking world peace is rightly identified by most of the world to be Israel, but not because of the reasons they cite. The reason that Israel is the key to world peace is because it will not come until they return to the Lord. When they do

return the world will undergo horrific judgments to remove the evildoers and the Lord will establish His kingdom and place Israel at the fore. In a very real sense then we are waiting for Israel to return to the Lord. The certainty that they will is the fact that God in His essential character does not change. Second, that there is a proper way to test God. This test is not throwing out the fleece and challenging God to prove that He is there or that His word is true but rather to simply obey His word and see if He will not do what He has promised. For example, God says in 2 Cor 6 that we should separate ourselves from false teachers and He will welcome us in intimate fellowship. This promise can be tested by separating ourselves from false teachers. Every command with a promise attached His is faithful to do. 2 Cor 1:20, "For as many as are the promises of God, in Him they are yes." God is faithful, He will do it. Continue to claim the promises of God.

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