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Questioning God's Justice, 2

Malachi 2:17-3:6

The passage at which we are looking this morning addresses a facet of God's character, namely His Justice. When we speak of God's justice, we tend to think in terms of God being fair. And while that is a good beginning, the Bible has much more to say about God's justice.

When the Bible calls God just- as in Psalm 7:11a, "God is a just judge..."¹ (NKJV)- essentially it is saying that God's actions are in perfect agreement with His nature.² Accordingly, if we want to understand what is meant when the Bible says that God is just, we have to understand a little bit about His nature.

God's Nature

Now, obviously there is much to be said about God's nature. We will spend eternity growing in our understanding of it, never exhausting the pursuit. We are talking about an infinite Being! However, in the context of Justice, the primary facet of God's nature that we are talking about is His Holiness. When we speak of God's holiness, by now you know that it primarily is speaking of HIS OTHERNESS — the fact that He is completely different from creation and so is transcendent! Consider the cry of the Seraphim:

Isaiah 6:3b, "Holy, Holy, Holy, is the LORD of hosts, the whole earth is full of His glory."

What makes this verse so amazing is that Seraphim are without sin. Accordingly, that which floors them as they minister in God's presence is NOT the moral purity of God, BUT the fact that He is completely different from themselves! Referencing God's transcendency, A. W. Tozer wrote this:

When the prophet Ezekiel saw heaven opened and beheld visions of God, he found himself looking at that which he had no language to describe. What he was seeing was wholly different from anything he had ever known before, so he fell back upon the language of resemblance. 'As for the likeness of the living creatures, their appearance was like burning coals of fire.' (Tozer, 1920, p. 15)

Created moral beings are at a loss when in the presence of our holy God. That is why when man beholds NOT the Lord in His essence, BUT a manifestation of His presence, they are so traumatized. After Peter glimpsed the deity of Christ, notice what happened:

Luke 5:8, "But when Simon Peter saw that, he fell down at Jesus' feet, saying, 'Depart from me, for I am a sinful man, O Lord!'"

Listen to John's description of what happened when he was brought in a vision before the glorified Christ:

Revelation 1:17a, "And when I saw Him, I fell at His feet as a dead man..." - anytime mortal man is in the presence of God he is undone!

And so, when we speak of God's holiness, we are speaking first and foremost about His Otherness, His Transcendency. Ironically however, God's justice flows out of the second facet of His holiness, HIS MORAL PURITY.

James 1:17, "Every good thing bestowed and every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation, or shifting shadow."

1 John 1:5, "And this is the message we have heard from Him and announce to you, that

God is light [this is a description referencing the purity or sinlessness of God] and in Him there is no darkness at all.”

There is absolutely no moral blemish in God! Speaking of God, Paul said this about God:

1 Timothy 6:16, “...alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light; whom no man has seen or can see.”

And so biblically speaking, God is absolute purity. In Him there is no darkness (sin) at all! And that is why when it comes to sin — if God is to be consistent with His nature and so be Just — He must or destroy it or change it! Let me explain this.

That is what the Bible means when it says that “God is just”! Any error, rebellion, or divergence from His holy character will be met first with wrath/condemnation and possibly purification. By definition we know that “sin is any want of conformity unto or transgression of the law of God” (cf. 1 John 3:4)! Accordingly, a Just God (a holy God) will always punish sin. To do otherwise would be unjust! And so, we read...

Romans 1:18a, “For the wrath of God is revealed from heaven against ALL ungodliness and unrighteousness of men...”

God’s wrath on account of sin is the overflow of His character! In fact, in a world created by a holy God, we read of the following Moral Law:

Romans 6:23a: “For the wages of sin is death...”

Yet, in the face of sin, God doesn’t only condemn. Sometimes He deigns to change the thing that is sinful- which is what the entire Old Testament sacrificial system was about. On account of His Just Character, in order to cleanse a sinner God must take that which is without sin and punished it in the place of the sinner (God’s justice means He could never simply overlook a person’s sin).

Leviticus 5:17-18, “Now if a person sins and does any of the things which the LORD has commanded not to be done, though he was unaware, still he is guilty, and shall bear his punishment [which as we have seen is death. Yet that we might avoid this outcome, God made this provision...]. He is then to bring to the priest a ram without defect from the flock, according to your valuation, for a guilt offering. So the priest shall make atonement for him concerning his error in which he sinned unintentionally and did not know it, and it shall be forgiven him.”

That ultimately is what the cross of Christ was all about. It was God directing His wrath against the Sinless that the sinful might NOT ONLY live, BUT be purified. Paul writing of God and Christ wrote this:

2 Corinthians 5:21, "He [God the Father] made Him [Christ] who knew no sin to be sin on our behalf, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him."

That ultimately is why Christ's sacrifice was done in such a public way. In the Old Testament up into the New Testament, the sacrifices offered in the Temple were done in private where only the priests and the worshipper(s) were present. Yet NOT so with the sacrifice of Christ. God made sure it was public for all to see. Why? Because any time we speak of God forgiving sin there always is the possibility that some might cry foul, accusing God of injustice! Again, God's justice demands that the Lord condemn/punish the sinner. There can be no exception!

So, how can God purify the sinner without violating His justice? Only by directing the punishment of the sinner on another of like nature and of like responsibility! And so, we read Paul's words speaking of Christ:

Romans 3:25-26, "Whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation [a wrath removing sacrifice] in His blood through faith. This was to demonstrate His righteousness [His justice], because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed [hence many might accuse God of being unjust]; for the demonstration, I say, of His righteousness at the present time, that [on account of Christ's public sacrifice] He [God] might be just [the condemner] and the justifier [the forgiver and so the cleanser] of the one who has faith in Jesus."

From this you must see that when we speak of God being Just, there always is the expectation of EITHER condemnation/wrath for the one guilty of sin and, in the case of some, their forgiveness/purification. A just God could do nothing else or less!

All of that is the background of the text. The first thing we saw was "The Indictment Raised Against God" on the part of God's people at this time (Malachi 2:17b). Because they related to God on the basis of their performance, they charged God with three offenses: (1) God is silent in the face of evil. (2) He delights in evil men and women. (3) He is uncaring, not near, nor is He involved in our lives.

And yet, unlike men and women in redemptive history who struggled with similar questions when it came to God, those in Malachi's day did NOT ask these questions in faith (they were living by their works). The result is that they floundered in their walks and so became embittered against God!

We then looked at "The Provision for the Previous Indictment" which comes on account of God's character (Malachi 2:17a). Recall that it is God's goodness, love, and grace! If God were NOT loving, compassionate, gracious, or good, God's people never could have "wearied Him with their words"! For the moment they accused God, they would have been executed! And so, as we consider the justice of God in the text before us, we must keep in mind that it is the Justice of a kind, loving, gracious Being who here does NOT condemn His people, BUT instead sent Malachi to bring them back!

This led us to “The Fact of God’s Justice” in which Malachi essentially says to his generation, “You want justice? Be careful what you ask for, because God most certainly is going to give it to you!” (Malachi 3:1-2) With these verses we first considered the prophecies given here of John the Baptist and Christ. From this we learned two very important principles:

- Principle #1: God’s timing is NOT our own. The problem God’s people had/have with God in this text really did NOT revolve around His justice (that was the felt issue); RATHER their real problem had to do with God’s timing. They read the promises of God and expected them to be fulfilled in their lifetime!
- Principle #2: When it comes to God’s justice, it always will begin with “the household of God” and so God’s people (cf. 1 Peter 4:17)!

All of this brings us to vv. 3-5 and the consequences of God’s justice.

The Consequence of God’s Justice, Malachi 3:3-5

As referenced above, God’s justice translates into two actions on the part of God when it comes to sinning people.

First, as it pertains to God’s people in the present age, God’s justice works for our moral purity.

Malachi 3:3, “And He will sit as a smelter and purifier of silver, and He will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, so that they may present to the LORD offerings in righteousness.”

So where is the God of justice you ask? He is actively engaged in this world, bringing about His justice when it comes to His people by refining them in the fire of affliction!

Now ironically, this aspect of God’s Justice is the very reason you and I struggle with God’s justice. Falling back upon our performance AND then comparing God’s treatment of His children with that of the non-Christians, we cry foul!- just like the objection of Habakkuk.

Habakkuk 1:13b, “...Why dost Thou look with favor on those who deal treacherously? Why art Thou silent when the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they?”

In other words, why does God allow good things to happen to bad people? Jeremiah added his complaint to the mix:

Jeremiah 12:1b, “...why has the way of the wicked prospered? Why are all those who deal in treachery at ease?”

Yet what a misunderstanding! For as we have seen:

1. God's justice will always first be applied to His people- which means you and me, and
2. God's justice will always result in cleansing when it comes to His people- which means trial, difficulty, and hardship! Consider the language used here...

And he will sit as a smelter [a refiner of silver and gold] and purifier [though used of gems, the word has strong moral overtones] of silver: in Malachi's day, "silver" was more precious than gold and more difficult to refine! Accordingly, the expression here focusses on silver to indicate how precious God's people are to Him AND the difficult process which they will undergo in the process of their sanctification.³

Think of it, if you want the best jewelry or the best silver/gold, what do you do? You cleanse/purify it! And how does this work when it comes to metal?

A jeweler and invited me to visit his workshop, where among many other things, he demonstrated how silver/gold is refined in the smelting process. To demonstrate it more obviously, he began by sweeping the floor of his workshop where he gathered all sorts of dirt. He then combined it with small fragments of gold, and then heated it all in a crucible. Every so often, depending on the type of waste being burned, fire would erupt in the crucible.

When was the smelting process complete? When the gold was pure! And how was that determined? When you see your reflection in the crucible!⁴

That is what God is after as he "purifies the sons of Levi and refines them like gold and silver" in the fire of affliction! He is purifying them that they might be conformed to the image of His Son!

From this you must see that trial and difficulty in the life of the child of God is NOT there on account of the wrath/anger of God, BUT on account of God's purifying Justice! Because He loves us, His justice does NOT condemn us BUT transforms us into His image!

And isn't that where God's people were in Malachi's day? While they, relating to God on the basis of their performance, couldn't understand why God was "rewarding" their sacrifice with difficulty, we know that that was NOT the case! For again:

- The prophecy began with this assurance, "'I have loved you,' says the LORD" (Malachi 1:2)!
- And our text tells us that it was God's image in them that the Lord was after. God their Savior was bringing them through the fire in order to "purify them"!

That being said, notice that the focus of God's cleansing grace isn't only on our preparation for glory. It has a short-term objective:

Malachi 3:4, "Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD, as in the

days of old and as in former years.⁵”

Recall, the term for “pleasing” is Covenant language which refers NOT to an emotional response on the part of God, BUT a description of a person being in the place of salvific blessing- in which, for example:

- The valley of weeping becomes a spring, Psalm 84:6.
- One’s delight is nothing less than the Lord, Isaiah 58:13-14.
- Those who should be most burdened in life don’t faint, but “mount up with wings like eagles” (Isaiah 40:28-31)!

This is where God would have His people live regardless of the external circumstances of life — loving, knowing, and being comforted by God. To His people who just lost everything, God gave them this word of assurance.

Isaiah 43:2-3a, “When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they will not overflow you. When you walk through the fire, you will not be scorched, nor will the flame burn you. For I am the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, your Savior...”

Romans 5:3-5, “And not only this, but we also exult in our tribulations, knowing that tribulation brings about perseverance; and perseverance, proven character; and proven character, hope; and hope does not disappoint, because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us.”

It is in the crucible that we come to a fuller understanding of the love of God and so love the Lord in return! And yet, that is NOT the whole story when it comes to the application of God’s justice in this World. It also results in wrath and condemnation when it comes to the non-Christian. Notice that God’s justice will damn the sinner.

God’s Justice will Damn the Sinner, v. 5.

Malachi 3:5, “Then I will draw near to you for judgment⁶ [God here is NOT talking about His children, BUT the goats who live amongst His sheep. Notice how they are described...] and I will be a swift [or expert] witness^{7,8} against⁹ the sorcerers [who ultimately were worshippers of Satan] and against the adulterers and against those who swear falsely, and against those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan,¹⁰ and those who turn aside the alien, and do not fear Me,’ says the LORD of hosts.”

The language here is strong. God is NOT referencing sinful people struggling to obey. RATHER, He is addressing those who have given themselves to their sin. As such, they are the goats/false Christians! The progression here reminds us of the progression Paul used in Romans 3 after spending eight verses describing those on whom God’s wrath rests, summarizes as

follows:

Romans 3:18, "There is no fear of God before their eyes."

That is how God closed out Malachi 3:5! When it comes to God's justice as it pertains to "those who have no fear of God" — who are not saved — the result is wrath and condemnation! When?

- Initially upon their death:

Hebrews 9:27a: "...it is appointed for men to die once and after this comes judgment."- the moment the nonChristian dies, he enters into hell (Luke 16:23–24; Acts 1:25; Jude 6-7; 1 Peter 3:19)!

- But ultimately at the Last Judgment:

Romans 2:5-6, "But because of your stubbornness and unrepentant heart you are storing up wrath for yourself in the day of wrath and revelation of the righteous judgment of God, who will render to every man according to His deeds."

You say, "Why does God wait? Why doesn't He damn the sinner today? Why does God allow good things to happen to bad people?" Because He is a kind, merciful, and good Being. Listen to Romans 2 explaining why God does not immediately condemn the sinner:

Romans 2:4, "Or do you think lightly of the riches of His kindness and forbearance and patience, not knowing that the kindness of God leads you to repentance?"

God is so much more gracious and loving than are we. We struggle when good comes to bad people. Yet consider, how many of these bad people were in your family tree that if God rendered justice immediately, you would never have been born?

How many of these bad people were once you? When you were "strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12) And so, it behooves us NOT to bemoan delayed justice in the lives of the unbelieving, but wait on God to bring about justice in His due time! For to do so ultimately is to bemoan the kindness, love, and forbearance of God which has brought many of them to life! James Montgomery Boice wrote of this:

Robert Anderson wrote one of the most original and stimulating books I have read.¹¹ It is called *The Silence of God*. It asked why in our time, if God is as omnipresent, omniscient, and caring for us as we imagine him to be, he does not speak... Anderson answers that God has already spoken everything that can probably be spoken graciously. Jesus is the ultimate, final word of God in that area. Not a syllable can be added. The only words that remain to be spoken are the final words of judgment. And God is silent now because

when he speaks audibly again, that judgment will come. (Boice, 2006, p. 598)

So, God's Justice is applied in two ways in the world in which we live. It comes as *Applied Justice* for the believer which on account of God's love places us in the crucible to be fashioned into men and women of Christ. It also comes as *Delayed Justice* for the unbeliever which gives them time to repent.

In closing, this raises the question: What is God's plan when it comes to you and me? What does God do with sinning children who accuse Him of being unjust in view of His treatment of us and this world?

God's Assurance in the Light of His Justice, Malachi 3:6.

Malachi 3:6, "For I, the LORD, do not change;¹² therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed."

This is a bridge verse which brings our current study to an end, BUT begins the next section. So, what does God do with sinning children like you and me who are guilty of accusing God of injustice? In light of our study the past two weeks, we can be assured that as God's justice when it comes to our sin was satisfied in Christ. As a result:

- We "will never be consumed"!
- He always will be committed to our transformation into the image of Christ because He does NOT change!

Accordingly, we need never fear when it comes to God's view of us, His treatment of us, or His plans for us (cf. 2 Timothy 2:13)! The constancy of God's character means that we can live with the assurance that on account of Christ, "it is well with our soul!"¹³

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End Note(s)

¹ Cf. also Psalm 89:14.

² "Said of God, it designates the perfect agreement between His nature and His acts (in which He is the standard for all men)" (W. E. Vine, 1996, p. 338)

³ Cf. (Duguid, 2010, p. 225)

⁴ "Workers of silver can still be seen today in oriental bazaars. They melt the ore in small, portable furnaces. As the ore melts, the dross rises to the top and is then scraped off by the refiner. The workman keeps peering into the crucible, removing dross until he can see his face in the molten metal as in a mirror and knows that the work is done. In such a manner, God will apply the heat of affliction and discipline until he can see his image in his people." (Boice, 2006, p. 597)

⁵ "The last phrase is indefinite, being used to refer both to the time of Moses (Isaiah 63:9, 11; Matthew 7:14) and of David (Amos 9:11). Malachi is almost certainly thinking of the Mosaic period as the ideal era (Jeremiah 2:2, 3), when the Israelites depended directly on God." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 266)

⁶ "The second thing God promises is to come himself. This is an astonishing promise, of course. It is one thing for God to send a messenger. Indeed, that is what God had been doing for many hundreds of years. He had sent messengers like Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Daniel. He had sent the so-called minor prophets: Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, and Zechariah. Now he is sending Malachi, and he is promising to send John the Baptist too. They were all great messengers, great gifts to God's people. But they were men after all. It is not all that extraordinary that God should communicate with his people by this means. But now the truly incredible thing is that God is promising to dispense with the messengers and come himself. 'See, I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly *the Lord* you are seeking will come to his temple; *the messenger of the covenant* [this "messenger" is not the forerunner, but rather the Lord himself], whom you desire, will come' (Malachi 3:1)." (Boice, 2006, pp. 595-596)

⁷ "The Lord is both witness and judge in the lawsuit against those who refuse to take correction and so are condemned 'in that day'. No other witness is needed because no other could be competent (2:14; cf. Jeremiah 29:23)." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 266)

⁸ "God summons a star witness: Himself. He is the only one who can be trusted to act as an honest and discerning witness to the transgressions of His people." (Micah Fries, 2015, pp. Malachi 3:4-5)

⁹ "...the Lord describes seven specific violations of the Mosaic covenant, which between them represent the whole of the covenant code." (Duguid, 2010, p. 225)

¹⁰ "All these were always the Lord's special concern (Exodus 22:22-24; Leviticus 19:10)." (Baldwin, 1972, p. 266)

¹¹ The book is titled, "The Silence of God" and was published in 1965 by Kregel, Grand Rapids, MI.

¹² "While all else might be changing in our age of 'future shock' (Alvin Toffler's phrase), one may count on God- His nature, attributes, qualities, being, and persona fixed point of reference and as one in whom there is no variableness. Such immutability, of course, must not be confused with immobility; God is not restricted by some blind force or law to which He is bound no matter how much He might wish otherwise to benefit his children. God can change in His actions toward us as much as any other living person can. What He cannot and will not change, however, is the consistency of His own person as the basis of His actions. That is the comforting feature of His immutability." (Jr., 2002, p. 493)

¹³ "Only when we see that truth can we truly rejoice when we see Jesus coming to take possession of his temple. We can only sing, 'Joy to the world! The Lord is come,' if we know that justice's demands in our name have been fully satisfied and there is now no more condemnation for us as individuals. It is only when we know that to be true that we can delight in the prospect of standing at the bar of God's judgement. It holds no terrors for us now because we know that the Lord does not change, and so we, his people, are not consumed." (Duguid, 2010, p. 227)