

Spiritual Apathy and Justice in Malachi

DARRELL DELANEY

As a preacher and pastor, it bothers me when I teach a well-known passage of scripture, and people sometimes tune me out with the phrase: Oh, I know this one. I heard it already. As if hearing it and being familiar with the story is all that is required. In a world where spiritual apathy can take over because meaningful actions of worship become mundane and repetitive threats, God is calling for our hearts again in a refreshing way. Join us today as we unravel the profound messages embedded in the book of Malachi, exploring how its timeless wisdom can illuminate our faith and transform our worship, next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Welcome to *Groundwork*, where we dig into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Scott Hoezee.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I am Darrell Delaney; and Scott, we are going into part six of our six-part series. This is the last episode of our minor prophet series; and we know they are minor not because they are less important than the major prophets, but because they are shorter in length in book. There are twelve of them, but we have gone through...this will be the ninth one.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and Malachi, in the canonical order of books, is the final book in the Old Testament. We think it was written during yet another period of spiritual decline in Israel, about 430 BC. So, that would make it after the time of the exile, after the time of the return, around or maybe just after the work of Ezra and Nehemiah, when they were rebuilding the walls and the temple.

So, Malachi really goes after where the people are at now. You would think they would have been chastened after the exile. You would think they would have gotten things straightened around, but Malachi has some real concerns about the people's worship.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, even though his name means *my messenger*, it is really powerful to see that he has a very weighty message to give to the people; and similar to a lot of the prophets that we have spoken about before in this series, there is a judgment and then restoration theme. So, Malachi actually goes in that format as well, being heavy on the justice at first, and then turning toward mercy.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; God doesn't want to deliver judgment. He wants to deliver good things, but our evil and our sin often get in the way of that; but God's default setting is that he wants to give good things.

Well, let's listen to Malachi 1: [A prophecy]: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. ²"I have loved you," says the Lord. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord. "Yet I have loved Jacob, ³but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." (A little farther down in verse 6): "A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the Lord Almighty. "It is you priests who show contempt for my name. "But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' ⁷By offering defiled food on my altar. But you ask, "How have we defiled you?" By saying that the Lord's table is contemptible. ⁸When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not

wrong? When you offer diseased animals, is that not wrong?"

In other words, yes; you are coming to worship, you are sacrificing, and you are giving me...not the best...not the firstfruits...you are giving me the stuff you don't want, and that doesn't make me feel... You know, if you have ever been given a gift, and you realize the only reason the person gave it to you is that it is something they didn't want anymore, it is like, that doesn't feel like much of a gift!

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; yes, it is not much of a gift at all; and these are two of the six indictments that God has against the people. He names these two, and he also names breaking marriage vows; he names meaningless worship; he names robbing God in tithes and offerings; he also names they say terrible things about him. You know, what is really important is that he is zeroing in on their hearts. I mean, are their hearts really in what they are doing? Do they really honor God with their hearts? That is a challenge when that is not happening.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes; I think, Darrell, it is a question we can ask ourselves, right, when *we* are in worship. So, the people kind of, in a way, were going through the motions, but their hearts were not in it, as you just said; and it is a struggle we all have, I think, Darrell. I mean, Malachi was written a long time ago into a situation that is very different from our situation, and yet, we all know that we can be in worship...we can be listening to a sermon...maybe we can even be singing a hymn or a song, and yet, our mind wanders, you know; we've got a thousand other things on our minds. We remember how work went last week or we are worried about how work is going to go this week. We had an argument with our spouse; or we have some event coming up, even later that day; or maybe we are looking forward to a ballgame on TV. Wow; that is not exactly a mono-focus on God; and we all struggle with it. I would dare say, sometimes even when preaching, our minds could wander just a little bit. We can have our mouths saying one thing and our minds going somewhere else, even when we are preaching!

DARRELL DELANEY

That has happened to me before as a preacher, Scott. There are people who I respect that teach me different centering exercises to bring me back...snap my mind back to the moment; and you know, thanking Jesus actually is something that has been helpful for me, just to say thank you, Jesus, right where I am, no matter what is happening. I know that God is one of mercy, even in those situations. So, I don't want anybody to beat themselves up and condemn themselves when they have problems focusing for a variety of different reasons; but the heart is what God is saying to not have divided; and to not have that go all over the place. He wants our complete heart; and that is a lifelong process that God in his grace is showing us how to focus on him.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and it is not as though we fail God or let him down every time we so much as have another thought occur to us, like, oh, you know, my kid is home sick from church this morning. I hope she feels better. I mean, that is not exactly a sin, it is a distraction; but right; it is: Do we go to worship with a wholehearted desire to live for God, to engage with God, to listen to God's Word, to take God's Word seriously, even when we feel like it is a challenge to us? Sometimes, the sermon is a little hard to hear. That doesn't mean we stop listening, but we allow the Spirit to convict us. We want, as best we can, allowing for the fact that we are human...allowing for the fact that we can get distracted a little bit...but we don't want to just perpetually be going through the motions: We are just here because we are supposed to be here, and we don't want people to think bad of us because we didn't show up for church; but we want to want to be there, and we want to try to engage as much as possible.

DARRELL DELANEY

I think it is important to note, too, that the things that God is indicting them about is the fact that they are bringing defiled food...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right.

DARRELL DELANEY

They are bringing second-best things; they are bringing these low-quality sacrifices, which was in direct violation of what they were told to do. In Proverbs it says: ^{3:9}Honor the Lord with your wealth, and the firstfruits...the firstfruits...of your increase, so that your barns may be filled with plenty; and they are not doing that, which shows that there is something going on, that they are not grateful for what he has done; that they actually have a problem with their hearts. That is what the issue is, not just going through the motions, but they are not even doing that well.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; and that is why, even though, like many of the prophets, Malachi has some harsh words, he begins by presenting a declaration of God's love for Israel: I love you. I have been loving you. I am right here, and yet, you are not giving me your best; you are giving me your second-best, as you just said; and you know, again, we can all wonder about that. I mean, on a given Sunday, when did we get more excited? In worship that morning, when we are singing *Awesome God*, or when the Detroit Lions made a touchdown in the football game...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes, right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

I mean, which made us more excited? It ought to be *Awesome God*, but sometimes it isn't. So, you know, Malachi just wants us to examine our motives, examine our hearts; don't just make empty rituals, but have genuine enthusiasm—genuine reverence—for our gracious God. But there is more in Malachi, so, stay tuned.
Segment 2

DARRELL DELANEY

You are listening to *Groundwork*, where we are digging into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. I am Darrell Delaney.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And I am Scott Hoezee; and as we continue our exploration of the Bible's final book in the order of books in the Old Testament, Malachi, he is going to use here an image of marital unfaithfulness, and he is going to, Darrell, talk about divorce and so forth. There can be a literal component to that, and some listening to this program who have perhaps suffered through a divorce or a tragic divorce or something that was just an unsustainable marriage might feel like, you know, they are being criticized directly here. We don't mean that, because Malachi really wants to use that image...and this is true all through the prophets...you see in Hosea as well...the image of marriage and divorce. We see it in the New Testament, too. The Church is the Bride of Christ. So, God wants us to be in a good marriage with God, but sometimes things happen and it almost looks like we are being unfaithful to God; and that maybe we are de facto trying to divorce God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes; I remember preaching something like this, and seeing the anxiety in people's eyes, and people feeling uneasy. Is he talking about us, I have been through a divorce. Confidentially, I have spoken to the pastor about this as he targeted me; and that is not the goal. The goal is to actually: 1) Let you know that God is the ultimate groomsman, and he wants our undivided attention and faithfulness in a relationship with him. 2) We hear and acknowledge that brokenness happens in the world, and we would, in our good conscience...I know, Scott, you would not counsel somebody to continue in an unhealthy marriage with another person; but the goal is to allow the symbolism of what he is saying to be first and foremost, that God is the relationship that is primary; and when you worship other gods, and when you serve other gods that are not him, you are

actually committing unfaithfulness, and that breaks the marriage...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Yes.

DARRELL DELANEY

Spiritually speaking.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and God does say in Malachi 2 kind of two things. I mean, for one thing, some Israelites literally were marrying foreign women in contradistinction to God's law, that worried about marrying foreigners because you might actually also marry their religion...

DARRELL DELANEY

Yes.

SCOTT HOEZEE

And that happened. We know that when they brought in the Canaanites, they brought in Baal worship, too. Those things happened. And then God says, you know, sometimes you marry the people I have said not to marry, and then you are unfaithful to them; but then again, you have been unfaithful to me. So, what can God do? He doesn't want the people to be unfaithful in their literal marriages. He doesn't want them to be unfaithful in their spiritual marriage; so be on your guard, God says. Do not be unfaithful; and unfortunately, as the Israelites were in the northern kingdom before the Assyrians destroyed them, as the Israelites were in the southern kingdom before the Babylonians destroyed them, they had been unfaithful to God; and now, all these generations later, even after the exile, Malachi has to say something like that is going on again.

DARRELL DELANEY

And I think that is one of the reasons why in Malachi 2:16, God declares that he hates divorce; because if we know as New Testament and full Bible readers and students that that picture of Christ and his Church being united is not supposed to be broken in any way. We also know that if God enters into a relationship with us... In the Reformed tradition, we have what is called the profession of faith, and we stand up and say we are going to believe God; we are going to receive those blessings and coverings that you [God] have been giving us our whole life; and they do it in front of the whole congregation. It kind of looks like a wedding ceremony when we commit our hearts to God.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; some churches call it confirmation; some churches have the profession of faith combined with an adult baptism; but whatever it is, I remember...I am pretty sure this happened when I made my confirmation...my profession of faith...very often after you do that, we sing the song: *O Jesus, I Have Promised: O Jesus, I have promised to serve you to the end; be thou forever near me; my Master and my Friend. And that is what we do; we promise to be faithful to God, as in a marriage. We promise to follow God, follow Jesus now, to the end; and like the Israelites in Malachi's day, we sometimes struggle, and we sometimes fall short of that; and so, we need God to constantly forgive us, but set us back up on our feet to try to keep going. And Malachi wants to say to the people: Look, I am going to try to do that for you, right? He talks about this in Malachi 3.*

DARRELL DELANEY

¹"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, who you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.
⁵"So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice, but do not fear me," says the Lord Almighty.

SCOTT HOEZEE

That is Malachi 3:1* and following. We mentioned in an earlier program, Darrell, that there are several different forms of prophetic speech in the Old Testament, one of which is what is called a *riv*, which is a court case—it is a legal case. God is bringing a charge, like a court case, against Israel, and he is going to call witnesses and, you know, sometimes the mountains and the hills act as the jury, as it were; so, God says: I am going to put you on trial; I've got a good case; you better get a good lawyer, because I've got a good case against you. And there are various things that God is very much against, including sorcery; but also, you know, things that maybe we know something about today, and that is people who lie; people who are in favor of economic policies that disenfranchise the poor, often in systematic ways; people who oppress foreigners; people who oppress the vulnerable. God, in the Old Testament in particular, said: Israel, you have to go out of your way to help these people...

DARRELL DELANEY

Right.

SCOTT HOEZEE

But as prophets like Amos and Micah, and now here Malachi say: You've gone out of your way to make their lives *more* miserable. Boy, is that the opposite of what I told you to do.

DARRELL DELANEY

And unfortunately, what they failed to understand, Scott, is that God is on the side of the brokenhearted; he is on the side of the wronged and the oppressed and those who have their voices and rights taken away; God is actually advocating for them in this *riv*—in this trial. He is saying: Listen; you haven't been there for the orphan; you haven't been there for the widow; you have not done this; and therefore, that is a problem, because if you are the agent of transformation I am calling you to be, Israel, then you would have been taking care of these people, and there would be no lack; but since you are being greedy and idolatrous, and serving yourselves and building up your own barns, so to speak, you have lost sight of the real serving one another priority.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and you know, Darrell, in a society as we have in the United States, kind of a me-first, rugged individualist society, where selfishness is almost rewarded; where advertisers tell us all day long: You deserve the best; you...you know. We get kind of narcissistic, and we cannot see past our own noses, particularly to those who are the most vulnerable in society. The Church of Jesus Christ, also has to stand up for those who have no voice, no standing, no other way to do it. It wasn't just Israel's calling, it is the new Israel's calling too, to see the world through God's eyes of compassion.

So often, in the New Testament, we are told of Jesus: He lifted up his eyes and saw, and had compassion. We are called to do that, too. But as we wrap up this entire minor prophet series in this program on Malachi, we will have a few practical applications. So, stay tuned for that.

Segment 3

DARRELL DELANEY

I am Darrell Delaney, with Scott Hoezee, and you are listening to *Groundwork*; and Scott, we have talked about this series that has minor prophets in it, and we are wrapping up in this book of Malachi, which is the last book in the Old Testament; and the themes of God's justice and God's mercy are still relevant in this book as well. We serve a God who is a judge, but we also serve a God who restores; and we see that also in this book.

SCOTT HOEZEE

One of the things that maybe Malachi does a little more, Darrell, than what we have seen in some of the other minor prophet books that we have looked at in this series is to kind of focus on worship; in this case, that it not be hollow; that our worship not be sullied by our bringing our second-best to God; that our worship not

be distracted or become something that we do just out of habit, but not really with our full hearts engaged in it. So, Malachi has talked about that. We have talked in this series about, today, I mean, the prophets called for the people to keep God's law. We know we are saved by grace alone, but we still follow God's ways and keep the law now as an act of gratitude for what God has given to us.

The other theme that has been very prominent in this series, Darrell, ties in with covenant.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, we see that covenants are important to God. He has been making covenants since way back in the book of Genesis. It doesn't get very far in the Bible, where you start seeing God making promises. He is the one who knows that he is going to keep his end of the bargain. Unfortunately, we have not kept our end of the bargain, but we are called to live in relationship with him; and as I mentioned before, in the Reformed tradition, we call it the profession of faith when we re-say these vows of how we are going to live in front of the people who are witnesses. That is a covenant that we say to God. When you get married in natural marriages, then you make covenant vows and promises to the partner, and before God as well. So, the idea is that everybody is supposed to live up to their part, but brokenness has gotten in our way, and that is why we need a savior.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; but the good news of the minor prophets is that after justice comes mercy. God keeps doing what he can to kind of get us across the finish line; and ultimately, we will never make it on our own, so the Messiah did come. That is the ultimate hope that we have; and in fact, if we look, Darrell, at Malachi 3, and then a little bit in Malachi 4, let's listen to these things that Malachi predicts, including something from Chapter 4 that is going to point us straight ahead to the New Testament.

Here is from Malachi 3, beginning at the 16th verse:

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“On the day when I act,” says the Lord Almighty, “they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him. ¹⁸And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.”

Then, from Chapter 4, Darrell.

DARRELL DELANEY

It says: ⁵“See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. ⁶He will turn the hearts of the parents to their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.”

We know, Scott, that that prophet Elijah is pointed toward John the Baptist...

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly.

DARRELL DELANEY

In the New Testament.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Right; Jesus will confirm that. He mentions it several times, particularly after the transfiguration happens, and as they are coming down the mountain, the disciples ask: Hey, what about this old business about Elijah coming? When is that going to happen? Because they had seen Elijah, right? They saw Moses and Elijah talking to Jesus; and Jesus said: He did come; he has already come; and it is like: Oh, John the Baptist. That was the one Malachi was talking about in Chapter 4; and what was John the Baptist's job? Well, two things: 1) A baptism for repentance, right? He called the people to repent of their sins. That fits right in with what Elijah literally did in Elijah's day, but also what Malachi is doing. 2) He pointed to Jesus. That is why, as we have mentioned before, if you look at a lot of medieval art, depictions of John the Baptist, he always has a very unusually long index finger. If you actually saw somebody with that long of an index finger, you would

say: Ooh, that is a deformity. But the artists exaggerated that because that is John's job: Point to Jesus; point to Jesus; get people to Jesus.

DARRELL DELANEY

And so, these prophets...all of them in the minor prophet series that we have done...they are all pointing to Jesus. The idea is for us to know that, not only is God using justice to grab the attention of his people to say: Hey listen, you are going the wrong way; stop it. I need you to snap out of it so that you can come back to me. But he also realizes that, in their flesh and in their natural state, they cannot get there. Therefore, he has to send the Messiah to come in and do both sides of the covenant, because that is the only way it is going to be honored.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; and he sent the one, John the Baptist, to prepare the way and to get the world ready for Jesus. You know, we have used this analogy before, but John the Baptist, who is identified here as an Elijah-type, he came to make people eager for the Messiah. We have said before, you know, if to the best of your knowledge, the plumbing in your house is all working fine, and a plumber shows up, it is like: Who called you? I don't need you. But if you become aware that you have a drippy pipe or that you have a burst pipe, or you know, you have some major plumbing issues coming on, well, you are either going to call a plumber; or if, out of the blue, a plumber shows up on your porch, it is like: Oh, thank goodness; get in here...get in here now! That is what John did. He said: Look, you have a problem with sin. Somebody is coming to fix it, so I want to make you eager to welcome him. I don't want you to send him off your porch, saying: I don't need a Messiah. No; you do. It was John's job to get the world to the point of being eager to welcome God's Christ when he showed up.

DARRELL DELANEY

It is a beautiful thing for us to understand: That we need that Christ to show up in our own personal lives. Because there is no way we can address systemic structures or societal problems on our own. We need Christ's power to do that. We need him to show us the darkness in our own hearts that we may confess, but we also need him to live the light that he is calling us to live, so that we can be agents of transformation in our society and in our world so we can be agents of that restoration that God wants to do.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Exactly; or as we have said, you know, also in this series, is that we are ambassadors for Christ. We represent Christ to the world. You will be my witnesses, Jesus said at the end of Matthew to the whole world. Well, Darrell, those are the six parts of our series on the minor prophets. In the nine books we have looked at, we have learned a lot about God; the God of justice, yes, but also of mercy and hope and restoration; and we pray that all of those things will flow into our lives through the power of the Holy Spirit as we again and again turn to God. Thanks be to God.

DARRELL DELANEY

Well, thanks for listening and digging deeply into scripture with *Groundwork*. We hope you will join us again next time as we continue to dig deeply into scripture to lay the foundation for our lives. Connect with us at groundworkonline.com to share what *Groundwork* means to you, or to tell us what you would like to hear discussed next on *Groundwork*.

SCOTT HOEZEE

Groundwork is a listener supported program produced by ReFrame Ministries. Visit reframeministries.org for more information. We are your hosts, Scott Hoezee and Darrell Delaney.

***Correction:** The audio of this program misstates the reference for this passage as Malachi 3:3. The correct reference is Malachi 3:1.

<https://groundworkonline.com/episodes/spiritual-apathy-and-justice-in-malachi>

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