

## **DOES IT PAY TO SERVE GOD?**

### **MALACHI 3:13-18**

Introduction:

Congratulations! You have successfully completed two years of demanding study in preparation for a place of ministry. You have reason to feel good about what you have done, and about what you plan to do. However, I have a word of caution for you—in the eyes of the materialistic world in which you live, you are a fool. They will want to know from you what kind of material benefits these two years will bring to you, and when they discover what your realistic expectations are, they will question your sanity. Our materialistic generation evaluates education on the basis of how much it adds to your income. Some of you have no hope of ever earning what you were earning before you came to Fruitland.

Our generation is much like the generation of Malachi. They put a price tag on everything in his day, and concluded that serving God did not really pay. At least this is accusation that God levels against them. “Your words have been stout against me, saith the Lord.” “Stout” can be translated “violent”, “hurtful”. That generation was calling into question the very goodness and

fairness of God. In doing this they were striking a verbal blow at the very heart of God.

But when the people denied that they had said any thing against the Lord, He further accused them of saying, “It is vain to serve the Lord; and what profit is it that we kept his ordinance and that we have walked mournfully before the Lord of hosts?” They looked at their plight in life, looked at their checking account, compared it with those who did not serve the Lord, and concluded that it was all in vain. It does not pay to serve the Lord. I suppose every person who serves the Lord for a lifetime will have such thoughts somewhere along the way.

I want to prepare you for the time when such thoughts enter your heart. The Lord gave a word to Malachi in answer to the question. Does it really pay to the serve the Lord? Is it wise for a person to give up a promising career and to pursue a calling in ministry? The answer is “Yes!” It is yes if you accept God’s set of values. Consider them with me.

**I. YES, IF YOU WOULD RATHER BE KNOWN IN HEAVEN THAN ON EARTH.**

“Then they that feared the Lord spake often to one another; and the Lord harkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon his name.”

This group stands in contrast to the unbelieving generation that questions the goodness of the Lord. They are identified as being a people who fear the Lord. This means that they live with a heart-reverence toward God. They are not just religious; they actually do serve the Lord. They obey and trust in Him as a way of life.

They also speak to one another—probably words of witness and encouragement. Instead of spouting out the skeptical words of their unbelieving generation, they always have a good word about the ways of the Lord—a word that expresses faith and hope.

They also fill their minds with thoughts about the character or the name of the Lord. They meditate upon His ways and His goodness.

While they are doing this, the Lord God above is listening. He hears them when they speak of His goodness, and even hears their thoughts when they think upon His name. But He does more than hear—He actually has their words, deeds, and thoughts recorded in a “book of remembrance.” God does not have any trouble remembering, but this is a way of expressing of how precious what he hears and sees in the life of the godly is to Him. A record is kept. Their name and their words and their deeds are kept in memory before the Lord.

This image of the book of remembrance may have come from the practice of the Persian kings. You will remember the example of this in the Book of Esther. When Mordecai acted in a way that exposed a plot against the king, and thus saved the life of the king, it was written in a book—the chronicles of the king. Later on a night in which he could not sleep, the king had this book read to him, and he heard again of the faithful deed of the Jew Mordecai. He decided right then that this deed should be rewarded. The next morning he set in motion his plan to reward Mordecai. To the utter shame of Haman, who was plotting the death of all Jews, he was chosen to bestow the king's honor on Mordecai. You will remember that story. You will remember the parade through the streets with Mordecai on the horse that belonged to the king with Haman walking in front.

God keeps such a book on those who serve him with a pure and ready heart. While it is true that those who serve the Lord are often overlooked by the world, they are remembered in heaven. So you have to decide whether you would rather have a “name” in this unbelieving world, or be remembered in heaven. It may appear that those who serve the Lord have been overlooked, but God has not forgotten—they are known in heaven.

I remember doing the funeral for a retired pastor, who had finished his ministry as a Director of Missions. When he retired, he had no place to live.

He moved to our city, and bought an old house that was actually condemned.

He and his wife, with the help of the children, went about the task of restoring the old house in a poor part of town. Before the task was finished, he became ill with cancer, and after a lengthy illness died.

At the funeral of this dear faithful servant of the Lord, very few people showed up except the family. I remember sitting on the platform waiting for the funeral to begin. I wondered how many funerals this dear brother had conducted. I wondered how many weddings he had performed. I wondered how many souls he had led to Christ. I wondered how many hospital visits he had made. Where were all of the people that he had helped? Had they forgotten what he had done? Was no one grateful? Then I remembered that every good word, deed, and thought was remembered in heaven. It does pay to serve God if you would rather be remembered in heaven than on earth.

**II. YES, IF YOU WOULD RATHER BE A TREASURE THAN HAVE A TREASURE.**

“And they shall be mine, saith the Lord of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels.” Compared with the skeptical world around them, they may not have many treasures, but in the eyes of heaven, they are a treasure. The word translated “treasure” is the Hebrew word “segullah”. A segullar was the

private, personal treasure of a ruler. He may have actually been the owner of everything, but he retained this special treasure just for his own pleasure.

This particular word is used of the Lord's relationship Israel when he first established the covenant with them at Mt. Sinai (Exodus 19:5). While as the Creator of all the earth, the Lord over all nations, He could claim ownership of each of them. Through the covenant Israel was special; she was His special treasure, his jewels. Here this term is used of the faithful who continue to walk in fear of the Lord, and serve Him when it does not seem to make sense.

The epistles of the New Testament have the same idea—we are called His “peculiar people” (Titus 2:14). It is the same idea as *segullah*. We are the source of special pleasure and joy as He relates to us in the New Covenant. But it is a reciprocal thing—those who are made His treasure make Him the treasure of their lives. Those who bring pleasure to Him through this covenant relationship, find their pleasure in knowing and serving Him in this evil world. Many scholars believe that this was what Jesus meant when he spoke of laying up your treasures in heaven, and when he said that wherever your treasure is, there will your heart be also. (Mathew 6:21)

Does it pay to serve the Lord? Yes, if you would rather be a treasure than have a treasure. Would you rather have a relationship with Lord that brings much pleasure to His heart of love, or lay up some of the goods of this world that will perish after a while? Would you rather find pleasure in the Lord, or enjoy the pleasures of this world that last only for a short season? Those who really give their hearts to Him in faithful service are His pride and joy. Is this not the real purpose of life—to bring joy to the heart of the One who created us. Yes, it does pay to serve the Lord!

### III. YES, IF YOU WOULD RATHER BE SPARED THEN THAN NOW.

“And I will spare the, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him.”

From the perspective of the skeptical Hebrew who thinks serving God is in vain, it appears that those who arrogantly do their own will get along in life much better than the godly man. They seem to get the promotions at work first, they seem to live in the bigger houses, drive the new chariots, shop at the more expensive stores, take the longer vacations, and just seem to generally be the more prosperous. It appears that God lets them get by with all kinds of transgressions.

Yet the godly man seems to always be facing some kind of difficulty.

Serving God does not seem to have a pay off in terms of the conditions under which you live.

But in His response God forces the wondering man to take a longer look. It the day in which God judges the world, He has promised to spare the righteous like a kind-hearted father spares the son who is consistently attempting to do the right thing. While at the same time the arrogant and prosperous proud will burn in the fire of his judgment like chaff in a furnace. They will become ashes under the feet of the godly. Which would you rather have, God's mercy in the Day of Judgment or a life of ease now?

What this means is this! When you see the world around you enjoying its materialistic lifestyle, adding to the toys with which they amuse themselves, do not be envious! This is as good as it gets for them. They Day of Judgment in the end of the age will be for them a day of horrible loss and sorrow. Life will never be better for them than it is right now.

But when you find yourself struggling, taking your children to Goodwill to buy their clothes, driving an old car that the deacon wore out five years ago, and living in a parsonage that was last remodeled twenty-five years and ten pastors ago, just remember that this is bad as it will ever be.

I heard about a man who went to the pet store in the mall and placed a strange order. He asked the clerk for 15 mice, and 1000 cock roaches. The clerk wondered about the order, but found what the man was asking for. When he came back two weeks later to pick up his order, the curiosity of the clerk got the best of him, and he blurted out his question. “Would you please tell me what you want with these mice and roaches? I have never had such an order in all of my years of working here.”

The man replied with a smile, “O it is simple. I have been the pastor of a Baptist church out in the county, and they terminated me a few days ago. The deacons are insisting that we leave the parsonage just like we found it. So we needed the mice and the roaches to restore it to the condition in which we found it.”

God shows mercy and compassion to those who serve him in the Day of Judgment. So the prophet asks the people—which shall it be? Would you rather be spared then than now? If you would be willing to wait on the dividends for serving God to the end of the age, then serving God makes a lot of sense.

In closing let me emphasize something—there is difference in being religious and serving the Lord. You can be religious and actually serve yourself. Such religious service of self may pay off with the approval of

man, but it will make no eternal difference. Malachi has in mind a whole-hearted service of God. It does pay to SERVE God!