

Malachi 3/4: Text 3:6-18

Preface:

Well, People of God. To me it feels like it's been a long time since we've gathered together, even though it's been, you know, a week.

We're back in Malachi, the last of these Minor Prophets that we've walked through, and it's nearly the last of our time looking at them. We'll talk once more about Malachi, then talk about all these Minor Prophets in general, before we move into a new series together. (Get that input into me, too, please!)

Introduction:

The passage that was read to us today is actually two distinct interactions in Malachi, each of which follows that "Assertion (by God)/Objection (by People)/Refutation (by God)" or "Statement/Question/Response" pattern that we see throughout the book. In each of them God says something, the people respond, and God in turn responds to them.

But both of these passages are ultimately about commitments.

In each of them God asks commitments from His People, and then goes on to make a commitment Himself--a promise--to prove to them that their commitments are worthwhile.

And if we step back this isn't just the thing that keeps any covenant relationship alive, it's the thing that keeps every relationship alive. We commit ourselves, and the other responds with commitment in turn. We cry out for our parents, they respond with care that we don't have words to ask for. We invite someone to play with us, and they come play. Our relationships with others fall apart, break, when we offer ourselves, and the other person doesn't respond at all. And the advice we give to those who pursue, pursue, pursue someone who consistently rejects them is bail, to discover boundaries, to get healthy, by which we mean, end that relationship, because it isn't a relationship at all. It's one person throwing themselves at someone who is indifferent.

What we'll realize as we look at today's passage is the truth that God isn't indifferent, but responsive. Today's passage can give rise to a lot of things to reflect on, but they all have to do with what it means to be in a committed relationship with God, with His People, with

others.

I think the best way to talk about today's passage is simply to walk through it, and see what we see. I'll point out the way these two passages relate to each other, and the way that these passages relate to this idea of commitment.

Let's pray:

Prayer:

First Scene: God's Committed

Like everything we've seen in Malachi, we find ourselves in the middle of an argument that God and Israel are having.

God begins this way:

6 "I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.

God isn't talking about being impassive, here; being unmoved by humanity's plight, or changing His mind. Over and over we see God's responsiveness to the things His people ask of him, his willingness to extend mercy. And that's the capacity God is saying he hasn't

given up. God hasn't changed his commitment to Israel, He keeps sustaining them.

“I the Lord do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed.”

First: God's Really Committed

And God continues, doubling down on this:

7 Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you,” says the Lord Almighty.

The Israelites constantly, continually reject all the covenant promises that God has made; but God, who doesn't change, has consistently chosen to keep Jacob's descendants from destruction, which was what their covenant unfaithfulness called for.

First: Reciprocal Relationships

God says, “Return to me and I'll return to you.” And that can sound like withholding, manipulative. “If you do this, then I'll do that.” It can sound conditional, because, frankly...it is conditional, right? “If you do this, then I'll do this.” The condition is you doing

something, which will cause me to respond in a certain way.

But what God says here isn't conditional in the context of an intimate relationship--a marriage, a rare friendship, a covenant. In a relationship, turning to the other person, a return to the relationship, is fundamental. If you refuse me, then I can't pursue you. That's stalking. That's rejecting the other party--the one you've covenanted with--rejecting their ability to make choices, to break promises, to betray you. To force someone to return to you is proof that you aren't in a relationship with them at all. The reason Paul says, "Insofar as it's up to you, be reconciled to each other" is because it is not always up to us; reconciliation, relationship, covenant, they take two, baby.

And of course, Israel asks "How?" ***'How are we to return?'***

God responds to this with a long focus on the way the Israelites have stopped giving tithes and offerings to God through the Temple System.

First: God Invites Israel To Be Committed (Again):

8 “Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.

“But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’

“In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse —your whole nation—because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the Lord Almighty. 12 “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty.

We could talk about so many things here. The Temple has just been completed; for the tithe and offering system to break down now is to wreck the entire re-establishment of Judah’s society. We’ve got to see this. Without tithes and offerings, the priests don’t eat. And here God specifically focuses on the way that

withholding the tithes and offerings results in empty cupboards in the Temple. “There’s no food in my house,” God says. And if there’s nothing for the priests to eat, then the priests are going to have to go back home, you know? Work their day jobs, pay the mortgage. The Temple System, this center of Judah’s life, will just...fail.

But I want to focus on the back-and-forth of commitment here. Because God is asking a commitment of Israel, right? I mean, there’s a “put your money where your mouth is” thing happening when God says “Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse.” To give this away, to God, means that Judah won’t have it for themselves to eat. If they give to the Temple, they’ll have less.

God recognizes this. But God isn’t a capitalist, right? God’s the opposite; charging or earning interest, usury, was unfaithful as far as the Law went. He’s not interested in Judah treating their giving to the Temple as an investment, which will provide some material return for them. Instead, God is bringing them back to their relationship. God is refocusing them on the fact that He hasn’t changed; will they go back to the way they were.

God is asking them to trust him: If he says he'll protect their crop from bad weather, from pests, if they'll simply do what they've already promised, as far as the covenant goes, He will. If he says he'll bless them, as the covenant called for, He will. They have to decide if they are going to trust God. They can look to the ways God has been trustworthy so far. They can think about the nations around them.

First: Relationships

But everything about this passage has to do with the relationship God has to his people, the ways their commitment to each other is in force or in question. God reminds them of his commitment to them; He points out their lack of commitment to Him; He promises to show them commitment in the future, if only they would keep some of their commitment to Him. God can't force them into a reciprocal relationship; it's slavery if he tries. God can't continually bless them when they've functionally divorced Him; it's stalking if he does. God can only say what he says. "Return to me and I'll return to you." "Test me in this."

"I'm committed to our relationship; Will you be?"

So What?

Where would you go from this?

We could talk about the need to tithe and give offerings to the Church, but I don't think that this passage really launches us into that conversation. If you need to consider this, consider it, remembering that Jesus asks us for everything, when he asks us to give it, and Paul asks us simply to give what we've resolved to give, and gladly. If we need to take time to consider what we give to the Church, then will we?

We could talk about the way God's People support those who support the institutions that sustain God's People, and how that might, this side of Jesus, relate to paying a pastor or supporting a building, maybe. I think that's closer to what's going on here, and we should at least ask: Are those programs, people, and property that Smoky Row supports working and worth our support?

We could talk about how God will not stalk Judah, and will not make them his slaves, but seeks to have a reciprocal relationship with them, one of mutual blessing, of intimacy, and of deep commitment above

all else. He is ready to return to Judah with all the blessings He can bring, if only they'll return to Him, take up their place as His special partner in the world. And look: God always offers us this. Do you need to "return" to God? If we were a different congregation, we could call up a hymn and hang out for awhile, you know? Do you need to return to God? Or more than this: Do you see that God won't force you to love Him? God loves you, but won't shake you down for a hug. God isn't insecure, needy, or desperate. God's just committed. How reciprocal is your relationship with God right now? How attentive and engaged are you?

We'll come back around to these things. Malachi does in the second passage that was read to us.

Second: Questioning Commitment's Worth

The second passage deals, in theme, with the same things that we just saw. God says that Judah has "spoken arrogantly" against him, and they ask "What have we said against you?" God recites their words back to them "It's futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements?" They point out how those who don't live for God seem to be doing just fine: ***"...we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God***

to the test, they get away with it.'"

These people speaking are giving voice to the basic question every single honest person trying to live for God has ever asked: Is this worth it? Is this worth it? Because it doesn't seem to be?

Second: Affirming Commitment's Worth

But, look, if you're in a healthy relationship, you don't tell your partner, "Man. If I was in a relationship with them instead of you, I'd be doing a lot better...financially, sexually, I'd be more happy. I'd be blessed."

If that happens it's at least a sign that the person saying that stuff has some real work to do when it comes to orienting themselves to their relationship. It's a sign that the person saying that stuff is more committed to their satisfaction, their interests, their wants, than to their relationship's good or their partner's good

And these people speaking in this moment in Malachi are those people. Their commitment to God has waned; they're done with the relationship.

But there are those who hear this, and want to make clear they are committed to their relationship with God.

We read: ***6 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.***

I love everything about this from a commitment point of view. They talk with each other, these people who are committed to their covenant relationship with God. They put themselves out there. They discuss what they ought to do, who they ought to be, knowing that there is another way to be out there, those people shrugging their shoulders in jealousy, wondering if God's worth it. So they gather together. God, the one they are in relationship with, is attentive to them, hears their desire to not be like someone else. God is engaged in their engagement with each other. And then they write down, in the holiest place they can, something that will outlast them. They make a public commitment, which would have been not quite permanent, but very nearly so. Scrolls weren't cheap, and they weren't crumbled up and recycled. They

made a public commitment in a permanent way that they were together committed to their relationship with God. This is as close to a wedding as you get. This is ceremony. But it's public, permanent, and both parties--God and them--are engaged in it.

Second: God Promises

And God promises that His faithfulness won't fail them. He makes a promise. And promises, you know: They only make sense in the context of a committed relationship, a relationship of trust. A promise to come through in the future is only dependable if someone is already coming through in the present. God says this:

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. 18 And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

The lingering, unspoken promise is that those who give up on God will be revealed; those who have been complaining about all the stuff other people get will get what those other people get. The benefits of the

relationship God has will His People won't be there's when every account is settled, person rewarded or judged.

So What?

We could go from here talk about the importance of taking a stand if we believe that to take that stand is to be faithful to our relationship with God. In a healthy relationship, the things we do line up with our convictions. We have integrity. We live out our convictions, which means, simply, that we're committed. We're committed to be who we are to God and others. Are we making stands when it comes to matters of faith, or avoiding them? Our society invites reflection on this right now.

We could talk about how promises simply don't matter if we don't trust the person making them, haven't already come to believe they are committed to us in some way. A promise outside of a relationship in nothing. Who do we make promises to? Whose promises do we trust? When do our commitments need to be public, permanent ones?

We could talk about how easy it is to take a measure of our relationship with God, or with others, by looking

at the discontentment we give voice to. We are either becoming a better spouse, partner, friend, lover, child of God, or we're becoming a worse one. Relationships move as life and what it asks of us move. What makes us jealous right now? Because what we're meant to be jealous for isn't what someone else has in their relationship with God or their spouse or their children or anyone; what we're meant to be jealous for is relationships as great as they can be, and our relationships are always personal, respectful of ourselves and the other, full of love which is defined, and not a feeling. So what causes us discontentment in our relationships with those we're most close to? What are we discontented with in our relationship with God? And will we just long for what someone else has, or will we strengthen our own weaknesses.

Conclusion:

In the relationships we have with people we're always acting out the part we believe we're meant to play. We do the same thing for God. We'll be God's champion, you know? Bearing Christ in the world. We'll be God's child, basking in the love of a father. We'll be God's conscience, making sure that God realizes just how hard the world is. We'll be God's ex, He's just someone we used to know, or someone we stay with for the

sake of the kids.

But God is only Himself with us. God's commitment to us has never changed. We can resist it, betray it, reject it, deride it, bask in it, but God loves us. And today's passage gives us any number of questions we could ask ourselves, right?

What makes us discontented about our relationship with God and others? What relationships are worth our promises in our lives, especially public, permanent promises? Are we making stands, acting out of conviction, or avoiding them because they are always easy to avoid?

These are all good, but really, I just wonder in the end, do we need to return to God? Or, really, is there anyone we need to return to? Love doesn't stalk or enslave, but seeks reciprocity; God seeks it with us; Does anyone else? And how are we doing at offering that kind of love to those around us?

I think all the other questions that today's passage asks of us will eventually be answered if we realize just how committed God is to us, and respond to God's

commitment with our own. God wants us to see just how unchanging He is in His commitment to us.

We're given dozens of times a day to choose faithfulness over unfaithfulness, but those little choices follow from the much larger choice to live for Christ, led by the Spirit, in the love of our Father. That's our central relationship, and we can't let it go un-nurtured.

What relationships have you nurtured recently? What ones have you just hoped don't fall apart? And your relationship with God, is it thriving? Is it intimate? Is it one that's guiding our choices right now?