

## ***Malachi 4/4: 3:1-5, 4:1-6***

### ***Preface:***

Today is our last real message on the Minor Prophets. We'll have a summary message next week, which I hope will be memorable, reminding us of the best of what we've seen as we've looked at these books. But today is the last day we're talking about a particular passage from a particular prophet.

That prophet's Malachi, and we're looking at two passages, really, which are often brought together in the New Testament.

And I don't expect us to remember this, but we haven't talked at all about the way Malachi is used in the New Testament. We have to, though, because it was really, really important to how we understand one of the major characters of the New Testament.

So we'll talk about this, about how important today's readings from Malachi were to Jesus' first followers, before they were even gathered together by the Spirit as the Church. We'll talk about how the Church can use today's passage now, and how we ourselves might make use of what was read to us. Today's message pushes a little; not much, but a little. I'm okay with that; if you aren't, you know...yikes. We'll roll with it.

Let's pray that this moment is useful for us, and for every single person who we engage with today, tomorrow, to come. I just want, you know...I want Scripture to matter. I want these Sunday mornings we give up for God to make some sort of difference in the places we're scattered about in.

Let's pray for that.

**Prayer:**

Hail, Hail, Lion of Judah...

**Malachi:**

What was read to us today begins this way:

***"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, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.***

**Matthew 11:**

There's a famous scene in Matthew's Gospel.

John, Jesus' cousin, whose story is interwoven with Jesus' throughout Matthew, has been jailed. He's been calling people to confess their sins, to be baptized as a sign of their desire to live a new, different kind of life, a symbol of their repentance. And he railed against the sin of the powers that

be, so he was imprisoned, because, you know...they had power to imprison him.

And John needs reassured that he hasn't been abandoned, that his work hasn't been useless, in vain. He goes to Jesus with his questions, and Jesus answers him with a reminder of who he himself is, and and encouragement to keep hoping and trusting despite John's present circumstances.

And you know, when we are faced with doubt of some kind, or are perplexed that our life is the way it is when we thought it would be different by now, then we have to do the same thing. We have to take our questions to someone we can trust, who can give us the insight and wisdom we need. In the best case, we're able to take these questions to God through prayer, leaning into Scripture and the Spirit as we do. At least let's take them to each other. John entrusts these worries to his disciples who bring them to Jesus, after all.

But Jesus forces the crowd around him to deal with their motivations for rushing toward John out in the desert. "What did you go out into the desert to see?" He asks. He offers a couple of softball "no's" and then says, "Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

***"I will send my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.'[c]***

***11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.”***

Jesus does so much here: Affirming John as a successful prophet, not a failed one, despite being in prison and soon to die. Humans have just by and large never thought someone in jail could possibly be a good guy. He locates John in the great history of prophets who spoke for God, but still makes it clear that John may have been the Old Covenant's pinnacle, but the lowest of the low who embrace God's mercy in the New Covenant in Christ are more privileged than John was.

And Jesus quotes Malachi to talk about John. He's quoting Malachi. As far as Jesus is concerned--and his opinion gets to define things, you know; his standard becomes the standard of his followers--as far as he's concerned, when Malachi says what he says today, Malachi is talking about John the Baptist. Malachi couldn't have known that. We do.

### ***Luke 1:***

But look, Jesus grew up hearing this story about John. Jesus knew this about John naturally and supernaturally. John was born into this. When Elizabeth, his mother, was pregnant, an angel came and quoted Malachi to his father Zechariah. This

all happened before the first Christmas; we can read about it in Luke 1. There we read:

***11 Then an angel of the Lord appeared to [Zechariah], standing at the right side of the altar of incense. 12 When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. 13 But the angel said to him: “Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John.***

The Angel says all sorts of other awesome, miraculous, crazy things, and then says

***17 And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”***

And of course, the angel of God is quoting the very end of Malachi here, where we're told:

***5 “See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. 6 He 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.”***

I mean, John the Baptist was the last note that Malachi, the last Minor Prophet, hit.

### ***New Testament Summary:***

There's no way to read the end of Malachi as a Christian and not recognize that John, Jesus' cousin, was the preparer, "Elijah," as Malachi calls him, the final prophet before the Messiah, both a sort last-hope of what the Old Covenant could do, and final proof of why the New Covenant was necessary.

### ***Reward & Judgment, Curse & Blessing:***

And there's no way to read the end of Malachi without seeing that it is full of reward and judgment, blessing and curse. Malachi uses stock apocalyptic imagery to talk about this; language that the New Testament and Jesus himself takes up in various places. We read:

***4 [a]"Surely the day is coming; it will burn like a furnace. All the arrogant and every evildoer will be stubble, and the day that is coming will set them on fire," says the Lord Almighty. "Not a root or a branch will be left to them. 2 But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its rays. And you will go out and frolic like well-fed calves. 3 Then you will trample on the wicked; they will be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day***

***when I act,” says the Lord Almighty.***

And this:

***2 But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner’s fire or a launderer’s soap. 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver; he will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, 4 and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years.***

This is all the stuff we’ve seen in Malachi already, stuff that of course the New Testament would take up. The basic point of this is that the point of God’s covenant was to create a people who would be His People, who could bring the promise of Abraham to fruition. Malachi is calling Judah back to their covenant role. Jesus, as he gathers up a new people around himself, those who would go on to call themselves “the way,” who would be called “little messiahs,” or Christians. They would become like him, filled with the Spirit who renewed their minds, who bore fruit in their lives, who made them into people for the world, seasoning and preserving it, bringing light to its darkness, speaking truth in love, and taking Jesus’ way of life wherever they want. A life of solidarity, forgiveness, and compassion.

That's what we're meant for. That's what you were meant for, have been re-born for, if you've been born again.

### ***Ethical Calling:***

But with that identity in the world comes an enormously high ethical calling. For us, to say with Paul "I no longer live, but Christ lives in me," and remember we're called, together as Jesus' body on earth, to mature into Jesus, who is the Church's head, our goal and the source of our growth, it means things. It has implications for how we live, the choices we make, the things we say yes and no to.

Malachi called his hearers to this:

***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.***

### ***A Certain Kind of Society:***

This was about Judah having a certain kind of society: Sorcerers starts the list, and were out because they were ones who tried to manipulate power, steal power, from God. If your people's covenant relationship with God is meant to define and influence all your other relationships, then there's



just no room for a sorcerer's work or way of life. Adulterers broke their covenant with their spouses, a relationship that pointed back to Israel's covenant with God, and behavior we've seen already in Malachi God condemn. If that covenant marriage relationship is the heart of a society, of course God wants to keep it together. Perjurers destroy the fabric of society, too; their lies destroy any fairness, equality, or truth that's present in whatever law rules the land; Judah couldn't follow Torah if resolving every civil or criminal issue depended on whoever had the loudest voice, the most powerful voice. A society needs truth in order for its people to make educated choices about any aspect of their lives. Those who "defraud laborers of their wages" create classes of people, the ones who work and have, and those who work and have not; their rise in society depends on stealing from those whose capacity to engage falls apart; pair these with those who lie, and there is no way for justice for the workers who have their wages stolen. And as God continues we see that the society God wanted is one in which those who have no power, no advocate or privilege, are not oppressed. To oppress the widow and orphan because no one will stop you is to reveal a society rotten to the core. And God continues: You'll be testified against by God, shown as unfaithful, if you "deprive the foreigners among you of justice." God demands a society so faithful that faithfulness spills out of it, so worried that everyone is treated fairly, that they treat those outside it fairly, for no reason at all except it's the right thing to do. God says Judah will be tried, and found wanting, unless

they ensure justice for those outside them, those who don't belong, who have no standing at all, no rights, no recourse, nothing, just don't belong. Judah has to ensure that the foreigners among them, without any rights, are treated fairly.

The basic virtue that Judah has to keep in mind is "fear of the Lord." This deep reverence, honor, awe. They have to recognize that they are not God, and their ways--which are so often merciless and unfaithful--stand against God's ways, which are consistently faithful and merciful. Their society is one of justice, peace, goodness, and fairness for those who have no privilege and power, and those who do support their cause, all because they recognize it is what God asks of them.

For Israel not to fear God is for Israel to saw off the branch they're sitting on; it's only God's sustaining blessing that has kept them in existence at all.

### ***We Are Not Judah:***

And we, frankly, are not much removed from this same ethical calling. There is not a parallel between Judah's society and America's society; the parallel most truly is between Judah's society and the way the Church functions. However, if we believe that Jesus wasn't just the model Israelite, but the model human being, the way every person is meant to live, then these moral calls that God makes on Judah's society, which are echoed over and over in the New

Testament, and still binding on us, the Church, only more so...what is demanded of us is, most basically, to demand these things of our world, practicing and giving shape to them every chance we get in whatever society we live in.

### ***What We Do:***

We reject any posture or attitude or work that is driven by a desire to be God, rather than created, but in humility consider others better than ourselves. We reject Adultery. We talked about what Paul had to say about this so recently. We reject perjury. Jesus tells us to make no oath at all, but let our yes be yes and no be no. We reject employer's arranging to take the pay that their worker's have a right to, and one of Jesus' greatest parables on God's grace is one in which a vineyard owner gave more to those he hired, those who he didn't need to hire, than made any economic sense. We reject the abuse of widows, of orphans, of those who have no power in our society, remembering that James told us true religion--true piety, the true show of our devotion and practice of our faith--is instead to care for them, advocate for them, stand in solidarity with them.

### ***And we must...***

And we must--I say this gently but firmly--must still make sure that those who are foreigners among us are not deprived of justice. We reject depriving the foreigners among us of justice. As participants in a common society that stands outside the Church, apart from the Church, we are not

allowed to have no opinion on those outside our society who are deprived justice when they come inside it. And all justice is, as Malachi presents it, is the extension of the same mercy and grace and blessing to those who have no right to it. Jesus tells us a parable of reward and judgment, where he says, “Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For [among other things]... I was a stranger and you invited me in.” The word we translate stranger, because we’re used to translating it stranger, is “foreigner,” is immigrant. Jesus himself spent his first years as a refugee in Egypt. And if it makes us weirdos to our own, if it makes us Christians who other Christians around us are suspicious of, that’s okay, because, as Hebrews reminds Jesus himself “suffered outside the city gate to make the people holy through his own blood. Let us, then, go to him outside the camp, bearing the disgrace he bore.” We’re called to identify with a Messiah who Christ who so deeply identified with outsiders that he died among them, and if the Church disgraces us for being like him, then God judges that. Hebrews continues, right after this, saying “For here we do not have an enduring city, but we are looking for the city that is to come.” And this is call back the author of Hebrews makes to remind those he’s talking to of what he says just a couple of chapters before: That all those who died not seeing Jesus, were, as he puts it, “still living by faith when they died. They did not receive the things promised; they only saw them and welcomed them from a distance, admitting that

they were foreigners and strangers on earth....Therefore God is not ashamed to be called their God, for he has prepared a city for them.” Our citizenship is, as Paul puts it, is in heaven; our allegiance is to the savior we wait for from there. We obey God rather than men, remembering Peter’s reminder to us that we are “foreigners and exiles.” We’re refugees in whatever society we find ourselves in, waiting here, living here in imitation of Christ, until he returns and makes the entire world our homeland.

### ***Malachi’s Moral Call On Us:***

And so the moral call Malachi makes on Israel is repeated again and again and again by the New Testament, and it’s only made stronger in the repetition. And whatever our role in society is, it’s to be salt and light to that society, live over its rules rather than under them, be more like Jesus than anyone else, and seek to ensure that mercy and fairness and equality are realized for those who are a part of our society, and those who find themselves in it as foreigners. We do all this, not caring if we’re disgraced for it, because Jesus himself died in disgrace outside his city’s walls, and we know that we’ll be judged for what we’ve done with ourselves in these bodies we have when he returns.

### ***What is the point of all this?***

My point is the news is ready for you to form an opinion on it. Facebook, Twitter, the pub, grandma’s house, the club; all over the place, your opinion is being demanded of you. I

don't care so much about our opinions, but I care deeply about our convictions, and I care even more deeply that whatever our convictions are, they are, first of all, formed in light of Jesus way of life, that his word and deed inform, shape, and test what we believe.

Second of all, I care that our convictions result in a certain way of life, that we are ones who choose to prove to our society the moral life God calls his people to. And in our proof, maybe they'll change, maybe they won't, but God will consider our choices faithful and honorable, done for him, regardless of praise or disgrace or wealth or poverty.

I care that we live up to Malachi's call today, and challenge every society, all of which will fall at Jesus' return, to do the same.

This is how we show our "fear of the Lord." We recognize that we are not God, and our ways--which are so often merciless and unfaithful--stand against God's ways, which are consistently faithful and merciful. We work to season, preserve, and enlighten our society, our state, our country, so that there is justice, peace, goodness, and fairness for those who have no privilege, no power, or no standing at all.

***5 "So I will come to put you on trial." Malachi says. "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.***

And the Lord Almighty, I think, is still saying it.