

When Serving God Feels Useless
Malachi 3:13-18
September 11th, 2022

1. Claim: Your words have been _____ against Me. (3:13a)
2. Question: What have we spoken _____ You? (3:13b)
3. Explanation: You _____ say it is useless to serve God. (3:14-18)
 - a. "It is _____ to serve God." (3:14-15)
 - b. But God _____ those who fear Him. (3:16-17)
 - c. He will _____ between those who serve Him and those who do not. (3:18)
4. Applying the Word
 - a. _____ is the thief of joy.
 - b. Serve God without the _____ of present reward.
 - c. Know that God _____ your service now and it will not be in _____.

Questions for Discussion/Reflection on Malachi 3:13-18

1. What accusations against God are implied in the people's complaint in 3:14-15? How might their circumstances have led them to conclude that faith and obedience are in vain?
2. What are some common reasons a believer today might feel like serving God is useless?
3. What do their complaints (and ours) reveal about our motivations and expectations?
4. How would you define the fear of the Lord as used in 3:16? What are the results of fearing the Lord and how does the fear of the Lord express itself according to the following verses?

Deut. 10:12

Prov. 14:2; 14:27

Matt. 10:23-31
5. What does this image of a "book of remembrance" in 3:16-17 teach us about God? How is the book of remembrance God's answer to the complaint and accusation in verses 14-15?
6. Look ahead to Malachi 4. How does the Lord continue to answer the complaint of the people that it is useless to serve God?

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Big idea: God notices those who fear Him and will remember them in the day of the Lord.

Intro

Malachi 3:13 returns to the same complaint we saw earlier in the book with more pointed language.

Malachi 2:17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. Yet you say, "How have we wearied *Him*?" In that you say, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and He delights in them," or, "Where is the God of justice?"

Now they say it feels useless to serve God. What's the benefit? What do we get out of it?

Do you ever feel like that?

Why am I trying so hard?

Why am I not just in bed right now?

Why am I carving out time every morning to read God's Word and pray?

Why am I pouring myself out leading a Bible study when people show up sporadically?

Why am I holding a high standard for a spouse when if I would just lower that standard I might be married by now?

Why am I discipling and disciplining and having hard conversations with my kids when I could just check out?

It feels useless!

If you ever feel like that, lean in to this passage.

1. Claim: Your words have been **arrogant** against Me (3:13a)
 - a. Their words are arrogant, harsh (CSB), hard (ESV), stout (KJV)
 - i. They are forceful accusations of wrong against the Lord.
 - b. There is a refreshing, raw honesty in the way God's people bring their pain and doubt to God in the Bible.
 - i. **Job 13:24** "Why do You hide Your face And consider me Your enemy?"
 - c. But what's different in Malachi that we've seen is it's expressed in a hardness against God, about God, spread around to others, wearying God because it's mixed with an approach to God that is not marked by an appropriate fear and faith.
2. Question: What have we spoken **against** You? (3:13b)
 - a. Once again, and for the final time in this book, they ask what they have done and the Lord explains it.
3. Explanation: You **wrongly** say it is useless to serve God. (3:14-18)
 - a. "It is **useless** to serve God." (3:14-15)
 - i. One group looks at their service to God and says it's useless.
 1. Vain – empty, futile, useless. They say this is a waste of time to serve God.

- a. Gallaty – they claim they gained nothing by serving the Lord, but in reality they weren't serving Him, they were merely going through the motions out of religious obligation.
- 2. No profit that they have kept His charge (i.e. obeyed Him)
- 3. Even their mourning over sin – an appearance of repentance – was merely to get from God.
 - a. Imagine a child caught doing something wrong, and they say they are sorry, and do their best to put on their “sorry” face, but they are looking around to see if anyone notices.
- 4. They look on the arrogant and “doers of wickedness” and are jealous.
 - a. They call them “blessed” because they are built up, they test God and escape.
 - b. There are really two groups here and then a third in the following verse.
 - i. Openly wicked
 - ii. Jealous of the openly wicked who seem to prosper
 - iii. Those who fear the Lord
- ii. What is going on in a person's heart when they feel like serving God has been useless?
 - 1. Wrong expectation of timing (i.e. if I can't see a benefit NOW then there is no benefit)
 - a. For example, to apply the text on giving from last week in Malachi, it would be like someone who puts a check in the offering on Sunday and expects God to roll in their financial blessings on Monday.
 - b. Instead, we give as a pattern of obedience that cultivates generosity and breaks the stranglehold of materialism and greed in our lives over the course of years.
 - 2. Wrong motivation for serving (i.e. I'm doing X for God so He will do Y for me)
 - a. This changes the motivation from a God-centered motive of desiring to please God out of a love for God to simply what you can get. And then if you don't get it, God's to blame.
 - b. This can show up in a relationship prosperity gospel where someone takes wise principles for relationships (seek wise counsel from parents and other mature people in your life, don't set your happiness on this person, prioritize godliness over attractiveness, maintain wise physical boundaries that are set back from the line, etc.) and take them as a guarantee of a future happy marriage. Then disappointment with God sets in when they are single past the point they thought they would be, or they had a relationship go south, or they married someone but marriage was much harder than they thought it would be if they followed the formula.
 - 3. Wrong view of the benefit of following God.
 - a. Receiver for the Bills tweeting several years ago after dropping what would have been the game-winning touchdown pass in overtime, ““I PRAISE YOU 24/7!!!!!! AND THIS HOW YOU DO ME!!!!!! YOU EXPECT ME TO LEARN FROM THIS??? HOW???!!! I'LL NEVER FORGET THIS!! EVER!!! THX THO”

- i. He later apologized and clarified that he is just passionate and can see how the Lord is in fact teaching him through loss.
 - b. But is this different from the believer who says, “Lord, I follow you, why are you allowing my kid to be sick, my body to hurt, my job to suffer”?
- b. But God ***notices*** those who fear Him. (3:16-17)
 - i. This is the first time in Malachi that there is a positive response by the people that is recorded for us.
 - ii. Contrast to those who are saying it is vain to serve God and contrast to those who are arrogant and doers of wickedness.
 - 1. There were some who feared the Lord (2x) and esteemed His name.
 - a. That had a healthy awe and respect for the Lord.
 - b. They spoke to one another about the Lord, as opposed to those who were complaining about the Lord to each other.
 - i. They spoke to one another – they encouraged one another – we are made for relationships with each other and a vital part of those relationships is mutual encouragement (adapted from adam)
 - 2. God notices and will remember.
 - a. It could be that no one else sees or appreciates your faithfulness to God.
 - i. Your husband might not be a believer or may overlook your quiet faithfulness.
 - ii. Your friends at school might mock you for being uptight or confuse conscience with judgmentalism.
 - iii. You may swim hard against the current of the culture and be labeled a culture warrior when you’re just trying to follow Jesus.
 - iv. No one may see or appreciate. But the Lord gives attention, hears, and remembers. And that makes it worth it. You have an audience of one.
 - b. **1 Peter 2:18-19** Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to those who are good and gentle, but also to those who are unreasonable. ¹⁹ For this *finds* favor, if for the sake of conscience toward God a person bears up under sorrows when suffering unjustly.
 - c. **Ephesians 6:5-6** Slaves, be obedient to those who are your masters according to the flesh, with fear and trembling, in the sincerity of your heart, as to Christ; ⁶ not by way of eyeservice, as men-pleasers, but as slaves of Christ, doing the will of God from the heart.
 - 3. They will be in God’s book of remembrance
 - a. Practice of ancient kings to keep a record of their rule, including people who served them well.
 - i. **Esther 6:1-2** During that night the king could not sleep so he gave an order to bring the book of records, the chronicles, and they were read before the king. ² It was found written what Mordecai had reported concerning Bigthana and Teresh, two of the king's eunuchs who were doorkeepers, that they had sought to lay hands on King Ahasuerus.

- b. Vivid language that the Lord sees and will remember. The labor will not be lost. It will not be in vain, even if not immediately rewarded.
4. They will belong to God
- a. my own possession – CSB – special possession, ESV – treasured possession
 - b. Gallaty – it’s a word one would reserve for a collection of jewels. It is used in 1 Chron 29:3 when David had 3,000 talents of gold and 7,000 talents of silver, but stored an additional offering which was his “personal treasures.” He had a safety deposit box in addition to his savings account. God says, “you are my treasured possession.” Can you feel the immense promise implied in that statement? The God of the universe would look at you as His private keepsake, as the item He values highly and protects next to His heart.
 - i. But is that just OT language for the people of Israel?
 - ii. The same language is repeated in the NT for God’s people.
 - c. **John 6:37-39** "All that the Father gives Me will come to Me, and the one who comes to Me I will certainly not cast out.³⁸ "For I have come down from heaven, not to do My own will, but the will of Him who sent Me.³⁹ "This is the will of Him who sent Me, that of all that He has given Me I lose nothing, but raise it up on the last day.
 - d. **John 10:27-29** "My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;²⁸ and I give eternal life to them, and they will never perish; and no one will snatch them out of My hand.²⁹ "My Father, who has given *them* to Me, is greater than all; and no one is able to snatch *them* out of the Father's hand.
 - e. **John 17:9-10** "I ask on their behalf; I do not ask on behalf of the world, but of those whom You have given Me; for they are Yours;¹⁰ and all things that are Mine are Yours, and Yours are Mine; and I have been glorified in them.
 - f. **Isa. 49:16a** "Behold, I have inscribed you on the palms of *My hands*;
 - i. Could you forget a name written on the palm of your hand?
 - g. You must know who you are and you must know whose you are. You are His.
 - i. Why do people join gangs and join fraternities? Belonging.
 - ii. Why do third culture kids struggle? They don’t know where they belong.
 - iii. Why is loneliness and isolation so painful? Who do you belong to and with?
 - h. A church should be a tangible expression of belonging to Christ. We belong to Christ so we belong to a body together. Every church does this imperfectly.
- c. He will ***distinguish*** between those who serve Him and those who do not. (3:18)
- i. They may feel like there is no difference now between those who fear God and those who don’t, between those who serve God and those who don’t, but there will be.
 - ii. Psalm 73 wrestles with this same dilemma
 1. **Psalm 73:3-5** For I was envious of the arrogant As I saw the prosperity of the wicked.⁴ For there are no pains in their death, And their body is fat.⁵ They are not in trouble as *other* men, Nor are they plagued like mankind.
 2. **Psalm 73:12-13** Behold, these are the wicked; And always at ease, they have increased *in* wealth.¹³ Surely in vain I have kept my heart pure And washed my hands in innocence;

3. **Psalm 73:16-20** When I pondered to understand this, It was troublesome in my sight ¹⁷ Until I came into the sanctuary of God; *Then* I perceived their end. ¹⁸ Surely You set them in slippery places; You cast them down to destruction. ¹⁹ How they are destroyed in a moment! They are utterly swept away by sudden terrors! ²⁰ Like a dream when one awakes, O Lord, when aroused, You will despise their form.

iii. It's been said that for the Christian, this world is as close to hell as they will ever experience, but for the non-Christian this world is as close to heaven as they will ever experience.

4. Applying the Word

a. **Comparison** is the thief of joy.

i. Their complaint started when they looked at their lives and they compared them to others.

1. "Why am I doing *this* but they are getting *that*?"

b. Serve God without the **expectation** of present reward.

c. Know that God **sees** your service now and it will not be in **vain**.

i. **1 Corinthians 15:58** Therefore, my beloved brethren, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that your toil is not *in vain* in the Lord.



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