

EASTSIDE COMMUNITY BAPTIST CHURCH

SUNDAY, JUNE 13, 2021

SERMON: "WHAT IS YOUR CHOICE?"

TEXT: MALACHI 3:13-4:6

I have a really rough time when I go to a restaurant. We enter, sit at a table (can't wait when that is a reality again), and the inevitable happens...the server hands me a menu! I have to make a decision. Sometimes I wish the menu only had three items and two of them were unavailable. My wife often looks at me and says, "you know you are going to get what you always get!" Chicken wings...I tend to be a creature of habit.

Throughout my college days, I worked in several restaurants and I found out something interesting. Many restaurant patrons want to be told what to order. When I worked at a Ruby Tuesday's in Branson, MO, I would go to a table and introduce myself, and then I would suggest two different meals. I can still remember what they were. At that time Ruby's were known for their fajitas and then I would suggest what was known as the "Smokey Mountain Chicken." "A chicken breast topped with ham, barbecue sauce, tomatoes, scallions and cheese. Served with fries." Are you hungry yet? We Baptists do know our food! More times than not, the guest would choose one of the two suggestions.

Columbia researcher Sheena Iyengar has found that the average person makes about 70 decisions every day. That's 25,500 decisions a year. Over 70 years, that's 1,788,500 decisions.

Some decisions don't play into our lives much, but there are many decisions that are, in actuality, life and death. Decisions that will define our lives.

Today we conclude God's message to the people in Malachi. The people are called on to make a decision and it is still the decision that everyone today is called to make...whose side do you choose?

Let's begin with our scripture lesson found in Malachi 3:13-4:6:

Israel Speaks Arrogantly Against God

¹³ “You have spoken arrogantly against me,” says the LORD.

“Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’

¹⁴ “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What do we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty? ¹⁵ But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly evildoers prosper, and even when they put God to the test, they get away with it.’”

The Faithful Remnant

¹⁶ 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. ¹⁸ And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

Judgment and Covenant Renewal

4 “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.

⁴ “Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.

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.”

Instead of learning from their arguments with God, the people continue being contrary with this final challenge:

God: “You have spoken arrogantly against ME.”

People: “How?”

God: “You say that it is useless to serve Me because the arrogant are blessed and those who do evil prosper. Those who test God get away with it.”

The people, rather than turn back to the LORD, become blatantly contentious and they openly mock God. They attack God. Their accusations are harsh and severe. They treat their LORD as an underling as they critique the covenant He instigated. Historically Israel has taken their strength, comfort, and hope from the covenant relationship. Deuteronomy 3:16 is a great example of this:

⁶ Be strong and have strength of heart. Do not be afraid or shake with fear because of them. For the Lord your God is the One Who goes with you. He will be faithful to you. He will not leave you alone.”

Now, by living in open rebellion against God, the people have turned their own world upside down. Wrong is right and right is wrong! The source of their strength, comfort, and hope is now the act of distancing themselves from the one who wants to bless them.

The way the words are translated, God tells them in verse 13, “You are having negative conversations amongst yourself.” The people are complaining to each

other and call the honesty of God's promises into question. They are calling God's covenant "pointless." Why? The people look around and see that they can "get" more by going their own way and trusting their own skills and cleverness. They then declare that the arrogant, rather than the humble, are the ones who are blessed. A final straw in their rebellion is their statement that they see no benefit in following God. Evil actions get them what they want and God won't stop them.

THERE'S ALWAYS HOPE

This last dispute takes on a different tone. In all the negativity and rebellion another voice emerges. Verse 16 tells us to pay attention when it begins with the word "then." ***"Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other..."*** The parallel image of those who spoke evil of God. They talked with each other and the focus was the LORD. The fact that we are told twice that this group "feared the LORD" is significant. Back in Malachi 1:6 we are told that the primary failing of the priests, the representatives of Yahweh, did not fear God. In the Old Testament, if someone is said to "fear the LORD," that sums up their whole identity. It meant that they pursued righteous living and a holy lifestyle based in trust and faith and obedience to God and His instructions. "Fear" is not what we think of in the 21st century. To "fear" God meant that you knew He is the Creator and Author of Life. God is the one who has all the power and He is honoured for how He loves his children. Blessings and punishments are the different sides of the same coin of true love. Psalm 1:1-3 reinforces the blessing of fearing God:

- ¹ Oh, the joys of those who do not
follow the advice of the wicked,
or stand around with sinners,
or join in with mockers.**
- ² But they delight in the law of the LORD,
meditating on it day and night.**
- ³ They are like trees planted along the riverbank,
bearing fruit each season.
Their leaves never wither,
and they prosper in all they do**

When you sincerely meditate on God and His instruction for us it will be reflected in your character.

What was the benefit for the faithful followers in Malachi's day? God listened and heard them. Not only did God answer their prayers, but we are told that their names were written in a "Scroll of Remembrance." In this time period a Scroll of Remembrance was a common practice, especially with royalty. The scroll contained extraordinary occurrences and punishments and rewards that were handed out. If you remember the story of Esther, Mordecai served in the palace of King Xerxes. One day he overheard a plot to assassinate the King and he passed the information on to Esther. Esther told the King's life was spared. In Esther 2:23 we read that Mordecai was revealed to have saved the King's life and his name and the event was recorded in "The Book of the History of King Xeres' Reign." Later in Esther 6 we have the story of Xeres, during a bout of insomnia, rose up and started to read the history. He came across Mordecai's actions and honored Mordecai.

This Scroll of Remembrance in Malachi is God's record of those who remained faithful during these trying times. Not only did God hear them and answer their prayers, but the fact that their names were entered into the scroll meant that they would be rewarded for their faithfulness in the future, and they would be God's jewels (vs. 17). When God's judgement falls, his "jewels" will be spared and cared for while the wicked rebellious group will be punished.

THE MESSANGER IS ON HIS WAY

The final words of Malachi are the promise of coming hope, blessings and judgement. The wicked community mocked God because they were expecting God to punish them on the spot...and He didn't. God is the author of the plan and it follows the LORD's will and timing. The covenant

relationship encompassed what we call the “now and the not yet.” There are true benefits for keeping the covenant in the “now,” but the real fulfillment comes in the “Day of the LORD.” The final judgment.

Before the LORD goes silent for 500 years, the promise of the Messiah is given once more. When the “sun of righteousness” rises, there will be healing, restoration, blessings and joy. For the rebellious, the fire will rise and consume them and turn them to ash.

The final verses are a call to renew their covenant with God. To choose to “fear” Him once again and offer true acts of worship that He deserves.

FOR TODAY

Each time I read and study the Old Testament I am blown away by the similarities to the times we are living in. We are living in a world where wrong is right, and right is wrong...and the world is proud of this. We live in a world where the priests of God are offering tainted worship to God teaching that with enough faith God must serve you rather than you serve God. If you suffer, are sick, or don't have the materialistic trappings of the world then you don't have enough faith. They flaunt their own wealth and prosperity. We live in a world where a so-called church two hours from us is lead by a “priest” who is a self-proclaimed atheist. She is a representative of what is called “progressive” Christianity that worship the so-called greatness of self and human ingenuity all the while teaching that Jesus wasn't particularly wise and we, in our modern wisdom and cleverness, can do much greater things than anything Jesus suggested. Has the North American church become so comfortable that we take our relationship for God for granted. We want to be followers...just don't inconvenience us! We don't want to be seen unloving and unaccepting in the eyes of the world while we ignore the wisdom of God.

It might be easy to get overwhelmed by the world we live in but, just as in the Malachi's day, the word of hope is proclaimed! The Messiah is coming...BACK! We have the knowledge and understanding of Jesus' first coming. We have seen promises fulfilled, the chains of death broken, and we have been offered forgiveness! It is not too late!

We are still in a relationship. We partake in a new covenant and it is sealed by Jesus' blood. The old covenants have been progressing through history pointing the way to the coming of Jesus, His death and resurrection, the giving of the Spirit, and the final return of Jesus. The promise of the new covenant is forgiveness, joy, and nothing less than a new heaven and a new earth. We participate in the new covenant by faith. It is all God's action towards us. As we read in Ephesians 2:8-9:

⁸ God saved you by his grace when you believed. And you can't take credit for this; it is a gift from God. ⁹ Salvation is not a reward for the good things we have done, so none of us can boast about it.

Participation in the new covenant means that you believe that Jesus is "God made man." If you don't believe in Jesus you are not part of the covenant. Acts 4:12 reminds us:

¹² There is salvation in no one else! God has given no other name under heaven by which we must be saved."

The Ten Commandments are still as relevant today as they were for the Children of Israel. They give us practical guidance of what God expects and how we interact with our fellow humankind. As we thank Jesus for the gift of salvation, we repent, we put off a worldly way of living and thinking and we seek to have the mind of Jesus. I Peter 1:16 tells us:

¹⁶ For the Scriptures say, "You must be holy because I am holy."

Once again God calls us into a relationship with Him. As always, the first message He gives us is **“I love you!”** The past message from God is still true from Jeremiah 31:3:

³ The LORD appeared to us in the past, saying:

**“I have loved you with an everlasting love;
I have drawn you with unfailing kindness.**

And it continues to play out in the New Testament. 1 John 4:10 reminds us:

¹⁰ This is real love—not that we loved God, but that he loved us and sent his Son as a sacrifice to take away our sins.

The time is now to choose a side. There is no middle road when it comes to a relationship with Jesus. Because we live in a sinful, fallen world, the way will be rocky. There will be trials and hardships...but this does not mean that Jesus has abandoned us or does not care. In Psalm 23, the promise was that the Shepherd would walk “through” the valley of the shadow of death not take us over it. We can take comfort in the fact that Jesus walked that same path and he has promised to never leave or abandon us (Hebrews 13:5).

What is preventing you from giving yourself fully to Jesus. Jesus is waiting for you to come to Him and his arms are open to you. He doesn't care about your past but your future. He will forgive your past and set you on a new course. The blessing of our relationship with Jesus is that final day when He looks at us and loving says (Mt. 25:23):

‘Well done, my good and faithful servant. You have been faithful in handling this small amount, so now I will give you many more responsibilities. Let's celebrate together!’

Let's pray...