

Malachi by Brian Bill

SERMONS BY
BRIAN BILL

These are some of Pastor Bill's Sermons that are not on
Sermoncentral

Malachi 2:1-9 Leading Others Upward

Pastor Brian Bill 5/11/03

There are some things that only a mom can teach...

My mother taught me about anticipation:

"Just wait until your father gets home!"

My mother taught me about medical science:

"If you don't stop crossing your eyes, they're going to stay that way."

My mother taught me about genetics:

"You're just like your father."

My mother taught me about justice:

"One day you'll have kids and I hope they turn out just like you." (I heard that one a lot)

I want to mention at the beginning that this sermon will not be a "typical" Mother's Day message. A couple months ago, after deciding to begin a book study for the spring, I asked my wife to survey the Women's Ministry Leadership Team to see whether they thought I should devote this Sunday to a message for mothers like I've done in past years. I was surprised by their answer. They felt that it was not necessary to dedicate an entire sermon to mothers and preferred that the sermon series continue with an application to mothers. So that's what I'm going to do. You can never go wrong listening to mothers about Mother's Day!

Actually, I shouldn't be surprised that people in a Bible church want these kinds of messages. After all, Bible is our middle name! As I mentioned last week, believers here want sermons that "bring it on" so that we can all step it up spiritually. Bless you for your bold beliefs and for your voracious appetite for the Word of God! Two weeks ago we were reminded that even though there are many ways in which we fall short, we can always count on God's unconditional love. Last Sunday our focus was on giving God our best by embracing an authentic faith, giving God priority over our possessions and by grasping His greatness.

I want to share with you something that happened after the second service. As I made my way to my desk to pick up some things to take down to "Pizza With the Pastors," a gentleman followed me into my office (By the way, he gave me permission to share this). He's been attending here for a couple months and rededicated his life to Christ during an invitation about six weeks ago. He looked at me with a very serious look on his face and started taking off his watch. I'll admit that I was distracted and in a bit of a hurry to make it down to the Family Life Center because my stomach was growling. When he got his watch off, he said, "Here, I want you to have this." I told him thanks but I already had a watch and then invited him to come down and have pizza with us.

He stopped me, looked right into my eyes and said, "This watch is all I have. I'm giving it to God. Please take it. It's my offering to the church." I held out my hand and he gave it to me. His eyes were filled with tears at this point and so were mine. He then turned around and left. As I stood there with his offering in my hand, I realized that he had just given the best that he had at great cost to himself while I had been locked into lunch and fixated on food.

I can't wait to see what God is going to do in each of our lives as a result of our text for today. Please turn in your Bibles to Malachi 2:1-9. As you're turning there, let me say that I'm going pick up the pace because this passage contains a spiritual smorgasbord. I'll need to talk fast to make sure we get to the dessert bar at the end. If you miss something I encourage you to pick up a tape or a manuscript in the hallway, or go to our website to listen to the audio file or download the text. Are you ready?

Let's begin by looking at verse 1 together: "And now this admonition is for you, O priests." Some of us might be tempted to check out at this point because this passage is obviously not for us, or is it? The connecting point is the term "priest" because it was not only used to identify a certain group of people in the Old Testament, but is also used to describe every believer in the New

Testament. In the Old Testament, priests were descendants of Moses' brother Aaron, who was from the tribe of Levi. They were called Levites and their job was to serve in the Tabernacle and later in the Temple. They were set apart for two primary purposes: to sacrifice animals and to serve God.

Under the New Covenant, Jesus, the high priest, who offered Himself as the final sin sacrifice, fulfilled this office. We see this in Hebrews 4:14: "Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has gone through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold firmly to the faith we profess." Hebrews 7:23-25 makes clear that because Jesus has become a permanent priest, the Old Testament priesthood is now obsolete. Verse 27 states that sacrifices are no longer necessary because He has paid the price with His life: "Unlike the other high priests, he does not need to offer sacrifices day after day, first for his own sins, and then for the sins of the people. He sacrificed for their sins once for all when he offered himself."

Amazingly, the Bible teaches that you and I are priests. We are set apart to be involved in wonderful worship and sacrificial service. 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light." John put it this way in Revelation 1:6: "And has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father..."

Here's how this passage percolates into our lives today. Every believer is a priest and as such is set apart for worship and service. And, just as priests in the Old Testament were to point people to God, each of us is called to lead others upward today. Unfortunately, it's easy for us to forget our function as followers of Christ and default to seeing our duty as drudgery rather than a delight.

I want us to first look at five fatal flaws that contributed to the spiritual slide of those who should have known better in verses 2-3 and verses 8-9. Sandwiched in between, in verses 4-7, are five leadership lessons that we'll close with.

Five Fatal Flaws

This past week we've heard about the basketball coach at Iowa State and the football coach at Alabama who lost their jobs because of "inappropriate behavior." In commenting on their exploits, Randy Kindred, a sports columnist from the Pantagraph writes perceptively that they "...had money, urges and an air of invincibility—a dangerous combination" (The Pantagraph, 5/7/03). It also came out this week that the author of the Book of Virtues has an \$8-million gambling habit. H.B. London, from Focus on the Family, hits it on the head when he states: "Each of these men has embarrassed himself by exhibiting conduct unbecoming to his profession" ("The Pastor's Weekly Briefing," 5/9/03, www.pwb@family.org).

As we look at Malachi 2, we're introduced to a group of leaders that exhibited conduct unbecoming to their profession. And, they did it with an air of flippant invincibility.

1. They dishonored God's holiness (Malachi 2:2-3). The first step down the slippery slope of superficial religiosity is that these leaders totally dishonored the holiness of God. It always starts here. It was A.W. Tozer who said, "What you think about God is the most important thing about you." These priests no longer honored God, which means that they did not consider Him to be weighty or heavy. Notice in the first part of Malachi 2:2 that because they didn't honor God they didn't bother listening to Him: "If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name, says the LORD Almighty..." The word "listen" means to "hear intelligently with the implication of obedience" and to "set your heart" refers to an active decision of the will. We know from chapter one that they didn't honor God because they were giving Him garbage for sacrifices.

We see again that God refers to Himself as "Lord Almighty" four times in this brief passage. This is the strongest possible title that He can use to communicate that He is "the self-existent One with a Host of Angelic Armies" ready to do His bidding. But they didn't care. They were bored with it all. They yawned in the face of Yahweh. And yet, because of God's love and grace, He offers them a chance to return. Look at the very first word of Malachi 2:2: "If." God is giving them a condition. If they persist in sliding south in sin, then He will punish them. This is very similar to Jeremiah 13:16, where we read: "Give glory to the LORD your God before he brings the darkness, before your feet stumble on the darkening hills." On the other hand, if they give glory to God and set their hearts to honor His holy name, He will unleash His blessings.

It becomes very graphic at this point. If they don't grasp God's greatness and honor His heaviness, then three things will happen.

- **Rebuke.** In the second half of Malachi 2:2, God declares that He will send curses upon them. We don't hear much about this word anymore. It's more than just wishing something bad on someone. A curse was considered to possess an inherent power of doom and destruction. The word, "send" means "to hurl" or "let loose."

When God says that He's going to "curse their blessings," He's saying that sin and rebellion are not just washed away by some benediction or religious service. In other words, they can't bless themselves out of the mess they're in. Verse 3 begins with some tough words that are aimed at their children and grandchildren: "Because of you I will rebuke your descendants." The way they are living today will affect their children tomorrow. We probably need to think more about this than we do. Are you living in light of the legacy you will leave for your kids and your grandkids?

- **Rejection.** I hope you haven't just eaten because the middle part of verse 3 is among the strongest statements you will ever find in the Bible: "I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices..." We learned last week that the priests were accepting sick sacrifices from the people and offering them to God. When the priests sacrificed animals they would lay them on a table and slaughter them, keeping the intestines and organs separate so they could be thrown away. This was a messy job. I have memories of "field dressing" a deer when I would go hunting with my dad. I watched him do it once and then he made me do it the next time, and the next time, and the next time (that's a parental prerogative, you know). The idea was to get all the "guts" and the other gross stuff out of the deer before we dragged it out of the woods.

If you're squirming now, you better squeeze the hand of the person next to you because it's about to get worse. The word "offal" refers not just to the intestines but also to "dung" or "manure." This was awful offal. God is saying that because His priests have not honored His holiness, He is going to give them manure makeovers! He is going to take the excrement from the sick animals and smear it on them. I'm sure you've heard about the horrible hazing that took place among students from Glenbrook North High School last weekend. The video of this was gross, repulsive and difficult to watch. Apparently, some of the senior girls forced a bunch of juniors to eat dirt, fish guts and pet food. Some had human excrement shoved into their mouths.

As terrible as this was to see on TV, and those responsible should be held accountable, what God is going to do to His priests who are just pretending to love Him is far worse. Imagine these self-righteous religious leaders with their faces filled with feces. God will not stand for wimpy worship or sloppy service. It's similar to what He says in Nahum 3:6: "I will pelt you with filth, I will treat you with contempt and make you a spectacle."

- **Removal.** The rebuke led to rejection, which finally leads to removal. When the priests cleaned out the offal, they were supposed to throw it over the wall and have it burned because it was unclean. But now, since their faces were covered with dung, they too were unclean and unworthy to serve. The last part of verse 3 says that they "will be carried off with it."

Friends, God is not passive about how we treat His name and He will not allow anyone to prosper for long in any form of rebellion to His known will. Why? It goes back to Malachi 1:2: "I have loved you, says the Lord." He loves us too much to let us keep living like we are. We must come back to a proper understanding of His holy love.

2. Departed from the way (Malachi 2:8a). The first step south is always a disregard for the weightiness of God. That then leads to a departure from what we know is right. Drop down to the first part of verse 8: "But you have turned from the way..." The New Living Translation puts it like this: "You have left God's paths." Once a leader stops walking with God, they must get back in step with Him, or their ministry is really over.

3. Destructive to others (Malachi 2:8b). When we depart from the way we usually end up taking others with us: "...and by your teaching have caused many to stumble." Since we all influence someone, when we grow cold, others will ice over too. 1 Corinthians 15:33 says, "Bad company corrupts good character." The priests were not walking with God and because of that their words made people waver. Instead of pointing people upward they were tripping them up. God said it strongly in Isaiah 9:16: "Those who guide this people mislead them, and those who are guided are led astray." Jesus had no tolerance for this in Matthew 18:6, when He said: "But if anyone causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a large millstone hung around his neck and to be drowned in the depths of the sea."

4. Desecrated the covenant (Malachi 2:8c). God had a special rapport with the priests that can be traced all the way back to Levi: "You have violated the covenant with Levi, says the LORD Almighty." They were allowing religious ritual to rupture their relationship with God. The purpose of the covenant was to produce a love from the heart between man and God and they had violated it. That word "violate" means to decay, destroy or corrupt and is used in Genesis 6:12: "God saw how corrupt the earth had become, for all the people on earth had corrupted their ways."

5. Despised by the people (Malachi 2:9). It's ironic that the priests were accepting substandard sacrifices in large part because they didn't want to get the people mad at them. They valued what the people thought more than what God did. But because they were in a spiritual freefall, they ended up being rejected by the people: "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before

all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law." The sham was over. Their gig was up. Friend, listen. When we don't take our relationship with God seriously than no one else will take us seriously either. People have seen enough Sunday religion to repel them from wanting a relationship with God.

Don't you think that's enough bad news? Let's move now to some positive steps we can take to lead others upward.

Leadership Lessons

1. Respond to God in obedience (Malachi 2:2a). God desires for us to listen and to set our hearts for obedience. It's one thing to believe something is true; it's another thing all together to obey it. I like how James 1:22 is translated in the Message: "Don't fool yourself into thinking that you are a listener when you are anything but, letting the Word go in one ear and out the other. Act on what you hear!" I love the model we have in the young boy named Samuel. After hearing the voice of God in the middle of the night on three different occasions, he responded in obedience: "...Then Samuel said, 'Speak, for your servant is listening'" (1 Samuel 3:10). Can you say that to God right now? Are you listening to the Lord? The litmus test of listening is whether or not you are living out what you know to be true.

2. Revere God as awesome (Malachi 2:4-5). In Malachi 2:4, God is longing for His covenant with Levi to continue. Levi was the third of Leah's sons born to Jacob. His name literally means, "to adhere," or "be joined to." Leah was hoping that with his birth, her husband might be drawn closer to her: "Now at last my husband will become attached to me...so he was named Levi" (Genesis 29:34). This reveals a universal desire of wives everywhere. They want their husbands to be locked into them. Men, on this Mother's Day, let's recommit to reattach ourselves to our wives. More about this next Sunday.

What's interesting is that the making of the covenant with Levi is not formally recorded. In fact, there are not many complimentary things said about this man. Even his own father had some harsh words for him in Genesis 49. What made the followers of Levi so special? We have some clues in Exodus and Numbers.

The fact that Moses and Aaron were descendants of Levi gave the tribe some prominence. When Moses came down from the mountain after meeting with the majestic God, he threw the stone tablets containing the 10 Commandments to the ground because the people were worshiping the golden calf. Moses saw that all the people were running wild and so he stood at the entrance to the camp in Exodus 32:26 and declared, "Whoever is for the Lord, come to me. And all the Levites rallied to him." Moses told the Levites to clean shop by wiping out those who worshiped the calf and then declared a blessing on them in verse 29: "You have been set apart to the LORD today, for you were against your own sons and brothers, and he has blessed you this day."

God was establishing a priesthood that revered His name and put Him first. Later, in Numbers 18:2, there is a play on Levi's name when direction is given that the tribe of Levi be "joined" with Aaron in the ministry at the Tent of Meeting. That's why God was so grieved in Malachi's day when the priests sniffed at the sacred and rejected His awesomeness.

Malachi 2:5 describes this covenantal relationship: "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name." This covenant of "life and peace" is a reference to what Phineas did in Numbers 25 when he took a stand against evil. The men of Israel were indulging in sexual immorality, which involved the worship of a false god named Baal.

God's anger burned against the people and so he told Moses to have those committing such abominations destroyed. Unbelievably, even after many were wiped out, in broad daylight, an Israelite named Zimri brought a Midianite prostitute named Cozbi into his tent and committed fornication with her. When Phineas the priest saw this, he jumped up, took a spear and drove it through both of them. This stopped the plague against the Israelites, but not before 24,000 people were killed.

God was very moved by what Phineas did and said in Numbers 25:11-12 that because "He was as zealous as I am for my honor among them...therefore tell him I am making my covenant of peace with him." Verse 13 summarizes this covenant of peace that is referenced in Malachi 2: "He and his descendants will have a covenant of a lasting priesthood, because he was zealous for the honor of his God and made atonement for the Israelites." With someone like Phineas in their family tree, it's an anomaly that the priests in Malachi's day could commit such abominations.

Let's be honest about something. Many of us are playing little church games, compromising, disobeying whenever we feel like it, right in the face of a holy God. If we would revere God as awesome, we would be changed forever. No question about it. You see, many of us are bored with God because we don't understand who He really is, and because we don't always honor His holiness,

we lose sight of what is really important.

3. Resolve to lead yourself (Malachi 2:6a). After responding to God and revering Him as awesome, the next step is to lead ourselves. What I mean by this is that we need to make sure the spiritual is real in our own lives. Look at the first part of verse 6: “True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness...” If we want to lead people upward we must make sure that God’s Word penetrates our own personhood. We must concentrate on our walk with Him more than anything else.

I’ve been challenged by Bill Hybels’ excellent book called, *Courageous Leadership* in this regard. He makes the point that while we are called to lead those over us, those next to us, and those under us, our toughest leadership challenge is the one in the middle. He suggests that unless we are squared away internally we have nothing much to offer anyone else: “We would rather try to inspire or control the behavior of others than face the vigorous work of self-reflection and inner growth” (Page 184). He further states that we should be devoting 50% of our time and abilities to leading ourselves and the remaining 50% divided between leading up, leading down, and leading laterally.

4. Repel people from sin (Malachi 2:6b). The last part of Malachi 2:6 challenges us to do whatever it takes to turn “many from sin.” When we see someone straying we may be tempted to turn the other way. James 5:19-20 exhorts us to not disengage from this task. If we’re serious about leading others upward sometimes we have to go get people out of the mud: “My brothers, if one of you should wander from the truth and someone should bring him back, remember this: Whoever turns a sinner from the error of his way will save him from death and cover over a multitude of sins.” Is there anyone you can think of right now that is deliberately disobeying God? Do you need to make a visit or a phone call?

5. Represent God to others (Malachi 2:7). One of the roles of the priest was to represent God and reveal His will to the people. We see this in the first part of Malachi 2:7: “For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge...” The word, “preserve” means to guard against perversion. And, in order to proclaim His message accurately you and I must remain in His presence. It all goes back to responding and revering, doesn’t it? When I prepare to preach, I like to keep in mind the model that Ezra sets: “For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel” (Ezra 7:10). First, he was devoted. Second, he studied. Third, he applied what he had studied. And finally, he taught others. That’s a good formula for each of us to follow.

Notice the second part of Malachi 2:7: “...And from his mouth men should seek instruction-because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty.” People should want to hear from us. That leads to a question, doesn’t it? Are you making people thirsty for God? Do people come to you for answers? If we’re living our faith out loud, people will notice and they will seek instruction from us. If no one has asked you why your life is different, then maybe it really isn’t. 1 Peter 3:15: “But in your hearts set apart Christ as Lord. Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have. But do this with gentleness and respect.”

Application

1. Let me list the leadership lessons again and ask you to assess your life as it relates to each one.

- Respond to God in obedience. What one thing can you do this week to obey Him? Is there something you’re doing that you know you should stop?
- Revere God as awesome. Read the Book of Malachi or the Book of Isaiah. ?
- Resolve to lead yourself. Are you growing in grace? Are you walking with Him daily?
- Repel people from sin. Think of one person who is sliding into sin. Determine to make a contact this week, no matter how difficult it is.
- Represent God to others. Speak about Jesus to your friends. Don’t back away when you have an opportunity.

2. Since we all lead somebody, who is that you want to do a better job leading upwards? Mothers, you are esteemed for your strategic role in the life of your children. Some of you might not feel like you’re doing a very good job. Remember that Levi felt like a loser until God got hold of him. There’s always a fresh start and a new beginning available to each of us – if we’ll but ask for it. How can you leverage your position as a mother to lead your children to the next level?

I want to close with a question. Does God have all of you? If not, why not? I was very moved this week by the story of Aron Ralston, the Colorado climber who cut off his right arm because a 600-pound boulder had trapped him for four days. He resorted to something severe because he knew that he would die if he stayed where he was. I’m reminded of what Jesus said in Mark 9:43: “If

your hand causes you to sin, cut it off.”

Friend, you may be in the same spot and you just don't know it. You feel like a boulder of sin has trapped you. You can't think of a way out. Maybe you're just going through the motions as a Christian. It's time to get out the sword of the Spirit and do whatever it takes to regain your first love. Don't play church with God anymore. He wants you back on your feet so that you don't get wiped out by your fatal flaws. And He wants to use you to lead others upward. Are you willing to let Him do that through you?

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Malachi 3:6 Coping With Change

Pastor Brian Bill 11/14/99

There are now over 2000 classified fears in the medical encyclopedia. Many of them are well known but some you've probably never heard of. For instance: butterphobia – the fear of peanut butter sticking to the top of your mouth. That is a legitimate fear for some people. Or, Photophobia – the fear that you don't ever look good in pictures.

Some fears we're very familiar with and some are more obscure. For instance, we all know about agoraphobia – which is the fear of open places. But, some of you don't know about angoraphobia – which is the fear of soft, fuzzy sweaters. We all know about zoophobia, which is the fear of animals. But have you heard about Furbyphobia – the fear of weird talkative toys that are impossible to turn off? And how about the fear that you are going to spend too much on Christmas – that's called ho-ho-ho-phobia.

Today, I want to talk with you about another fear – it's a big one – the fear of change. There are some changes that we love. But when we lose a loved one, or get fired from a job, or experience some changes in other areas of our lives, we cry foul. There are so many changes that come into our lives that we don't like. We resent them, we resist them, and we run from them. How do you deal with the fear of change?

There are at least three changes taking place in America that are causing a great deal of anxiety and tension today. I want to identify them and then look at what God has to say about some antidotes to help us cope with change. I want to acknowledge the help I received on my outline this morning from a sermon that was given by Rick Warren, pastor of Saddleback Community Church in California.

1. Everything is moving faster.

The pace of life is speeding up. Progress, in general, always causes things to go faster.

I've been reading a fascinating book by James Gleick called *Faster*. His main premise is that if there is one quality that defines our modern, technocratic age, it is acceleration. We've become a quick-reflexed, channel-flipping, fast-forwarding people.

That reminds me of a man who was out in his front yard mowing his grass when he saw his neighbor come out of the house and head straight to the mailbox. He opened it, then slammed it shut, and stormed back into the house. A little later he came back out of the house and again went to the mailbox, opened it, and slammed it shut again.

A couple minutes later, he came out again, marched to the mailbox, opened it, and slammed it harder than ever. The neighbor was puzzled, so he went over to the man and said, "Is there something wrong?" To which he replied, "There certainly is. My stupid computer keeps saying, "You've got mail!" Things are changing, aren't they?"

I read this week that King George of England wrote in his diary on July 4, 1776, "Nothing much happened today," because it took weeks for him to discover that the colonies were in rebellion and there was a full fledged American revolution going on. Today, King George would hear it instantly on CNN and be flooded by emails. And everybody else would be aware of it, too. Things are moving faster.

How about one more illustration? When the Chicago Cubs announced at a Press Conference recently that Don Baylor would be their new coach, it was old news – it had already been on the official Cubs web page for 9 days!

Everything is moving faster.

2. Every decision is getting complicated.

Even simple decisions are very complicated in our lives. There are a couple reasons for this. One is that technology has connected everything. The world has gotten smaller. Things that happen on the other side of the world affect my life today.

But more than that, the real reason life has become complicated, is that we are being inundated with multiple choices. Do you know that there are twelve different varieties of Edge shaving cream? There's Normal Skin, Fragrance Free, Tough Beard, Regular, Skin Conditioning, Sensitive Skin, Menthol, Medicated, Extra Moisturizing, Extra Protection, Extra Refreshing, and Extra Soothing. And, do you know what? No matter which one I buy, I still cut myself, get razor burn and miss whiskers when I shave!

There's a third thing we're seeing that's causing great stress. Not only is everything moving faster, and every decision getting more complicated, but also every value is being challenged.

3. Every value is being challenged.

We see this everywhere. Right is being called wrong. Wrong is being called right. There are people today that don't even believe there is such a thing as right and wrong. Every value we have had in America is being challenged by some group in some way today. Political correctness has created all kinds of crazy ideas. We now live in a society where everything is plausible and nothing is certain.

Did you hear about the new web site where you can bid on which model you would like to be the mother of your children? For an opening bid of \$50,000 you can arrange things so that your child will hopefully look like a beautiful model when he or she grows up. I don't know about you, but I don't think I'd want the personality and character traits of some of Hollywood's finest to be evident in my children.

How are we supposed to live in this kind of environment? When things are getting faster and life is getting more frantic, when things are getting more complicated, and when all the values that have held families and society together are now thrown out the window, how in the world are we supposed to live?

Alvin Toffler, who wrote the best-selling book *Future Shock* says that when people go through rapid times of change they need what he calls, "islands of stability". Those are things that do not change in your life.

God made human beings to be very adaptable and flexible. But, when everything is flying off the wall, coming unglued, and the hurricanes of change are blowing through our lives, we need to have something that does not change. As we face the 21st century and the new millennium, we've got to be able to say, "I know a lot of things are going to change around me, but I know these things for sure. I can count on this and this and this."

Is there anything like that in the world? Are there any islands of stability? My guess is there are probably some things in your life that you thought were unchangeable two or three years ago but have already changed. And they weren't reliable. Is there anything that never, ever changes?

The Bible says that there are three things that won't change.

1. GOD'S LOVE NEVER CHANGES.

In Malachi 3:6, God says, "I, the Lord, do not change." There's a theological term for that called the immutability of God. That means He's always been the same, He is the same right now, and He will always be the same. Why does God never change? Is it that He can't? Is it that He doesn't want to? Is it that He's stuck in His ways? Why does God never change?

It's because He's perfect. And because God is perfect, He can't get any better – and He can't get any worse. If you're perfect there is no reason to change, because you are perfect. So God says, "I never change."

In Jeremiah 31:3, He says this "I have loved you with an everlasting love." You were created as an object of God's love. You were made to be loved by God. You want to know why you're here on this earth? You were created to be loved by God. His love is continuous. It is everlasting. It is consistent. The Bible says that God is always unchanging in His love toward us.

That is such good news. Because while God is consistent, I am incredibly inconsistent. The Bible teaches that God loves me just as much on my good days as He does on my bad days. He loves me when I feel it and He loves me when I don't feel it. He loves me when I think I'm close to Him and doing the right thing and He loves me when I'm not close to Him and I'm not doing the right thing.

His love is not based on my performance. His love is based on His character. It is consistent. It is continual. It is everlasting.

No matter what happens to you in the year 2000, or even tomorrow, there is one thing you can be sure of: God is not going to stop loving you. No matter what you go through, nothing is going to separate you from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus.

Psalms 119:159 proclaims, "Your love never changes." You can count on God no matter what happens in the new millennium, or even tomorrow, because God is never going to stop loving you.

The point is this: We always get into trouble when we doubt God's love. Always. I never need to doubt His love for me. There are a lot of things I could worry about but I don't have to worry about that one. No matter how I feel, no matter what I've done, or what I've thought, God's love is based on His character.

Romans 8:38 is a marvelous verse. Listen to it in the Message translation: "Nothing living or dead, angelic or demonic, today or tomorrow, thinkable or unthinkable -- absolutely nothing can get between us and God's love." That means you can go to bed tonight, confident of the fact that tomorrow morning when you get up God is not going to have changed His mind about you. You will never be loved by God any more than you are at this very moment. You will never be loved by God any less than you are at this very moment. God's love never changes. That is something I can anchor my life to.

2. GOD'S WORD WILL NEVER CHANGE

In Isaiah 40:8 God says, "The grass withers and the flowers fade, but the Word of our God shall stand forever." It's timeless, enduring, and eternal. It never withers; it's always fresh. It doesn't get stale. God's Word is never out of date.

That's one reason why we are having a Bible Reading Marathon in a few weeks. We are saying that we believe God's Word is eternal – it will guide us today and it will lead us into the new millennium. If you haven't signed up yet, I strongly encourage you to do so after the service today.

Psalms 119:152 says, "Long ago I learned from Your statutes that You established them to last forever." God's Word will last forever because it is eternal. Jesus said it like this: "Heaven and earth will pass away but My word will never pass away."

Did you catch the cover of a recent U.S. News and World Report? Alongside a dramatic painting of Adam and Eve, the title of the cover story asks, "Is the Bible True?" Based upon some new archaeological evidence, the article answers the question with a confident, "Yes!" Brothers and sisters, we have nothing to fear from scientific inquiry into the Bible. We should welcome it. Why? Because the Word of God is true and will never change.

When the American astronaut Alan Shepherd was getting ready to go up into space for the very first time, a reporter asked him "What are you depending on in this flight?" His answer is classic: "I'm depending upon the fact that God's laws will not change." Great answer.

These laws do not change because God's Word does not change. What would happen if gravity worked every other day? Would that put a crimp in your lifestyle?

In the same way, God has established some moral and spiritual laws for the universe. God gives these parameters for our good. When we ignore these spiritual laws, we don't break them – they break us. We get hurt. Every time I ignore God's laws, I hurt myself. They're there for my benefit. When I go against what God says, it causes stress. It causes worry. It causes guilt. It causes anger. It causes conflict in relationships.

God says to you and He says to me, "I want you to listen to My word." Do you know what the most basic fundamental temptation is? It's the temptation that Adam and Eve had and it's the same one you have every single day of your life: the temptation to doubt God's word. We hear it like this: "Did God really say, don't do that?" If Satan can get you to question God's Word, you're going to fall for anything.

Listen to what Jesus said in Matthew 7:24: "Everyone who hears these words of Mine and puts them into practice, is like a wise man who built his house on the rock." Jesus is saying if you want to have a stable home, you've got to build it on an unchanging foundation. You've got to build on a rock.

The same is true for your life. If you want to build your life in a way that is solid and significant and handles the stress and the changes of the 21st century, you'd better build it on the truth of God's Word, because it is bedrock. It is not going to change. Popular opinion is going to change, psychology books are going to change, what the talk radio hosts talk about is going to change. Everything else changes. But God's Word does not. So if you want stability, build your life on God's unchanging truth.

Here's a secret stabilizer from personal experience: if you want to lower the stress and raise the confidence in your life, memorize scripture. That is probably the most significant habit that I can encourage you to develop in the 21st century. As you read the Bible and you find a verse that really speaks to you, take out a pen, write it down on a three by five card and memorize it.

Some of you say, "I can't memorize." Actually, we memorize what we're interested in. I know guys who say they can't memorize but they remember every baseball statistic for the last ten years.

3. GOD'S PURPOSE FOR MY LIFE WILL NEVER CHANGE

That's the third thing I can understand and know confidently. God's purpose for my life will never change. 1 Samuel 15:29 teaches that: "God is not a man. He doesn't change His mind." I'm really glad for that verse. Long before you were born, God planned you. And that plan has never changed. He created you for a purpose. You were made for a reason. If you are alive today, God has a purpose for your life.

Have you noticed that your plans often get changed? Why? There are at least two reasons: One, you can't see the future. You don't have foresight. You don't have the perspective. None of us can know what's going to happen tomorrow, much less ten years from now.

The other reason your plans often get changed is you don't always have the means to pull them off. You may have a great plan, but you don't have the time or you don't have the money, or you don't have the energy or intelligence or the opportunity or the power to pull it all off.

Contrast that with God. God never has to change His plans. Never. Why? Because God is all knowing – He's omniscient. And God is all-powerful – He's omnipotent. So God never has to change His plans. He already knows everything that's going to happen and He already has the power to do anything He wants to do. So He doesn't ever have to change His plans. His plan for you has never changed – and it never will.

Since God says, "I made you for a purpose and that plan doesn't change," that brings up three very important questions:

1. Can I miss God's purpose for my life? Absolutely. Of course you can miss it. Millions and millions of people miss God's purpose for their life all the time. You can miss it by neglect. You can miss God's purpose for your life by arrogance – by doing your plan and not God's (we learned about that last week). You can miss it by disobedience, by rebellion, and by laziness. You can live your entire life and never fulfill the reason you were actually put on this earth. That's a tragedy, but God never forces His purpose on us. It's a choice where you say, "Jesus Christ, I want You to be my Lord. I want to follow Your plan and purpose for my life."

2. Can I get back on track after wasting years of my life? Absolutely. Psalm 33:11: "His plans endure forever. His purposes last eternally." That means that no matter what has happened in your life to date, God's purpose for your life has not changed because He's unchanging. His purposes never change. Some of you may say, "But you don't know about that moral blowout I had three years ago or ten years ago. You don't know about that sin, that stupid decision I made where I took the wrong turn in life and wasted ten or twenty years or more. You don't know." I say this: Regardless of what has happened in your life up to this point – God has not given up on you. And He never will. No matter what's happened.

Let the truth of Proverbs 19:21 penetrate your life: "You can make many plans but the Lord's purpose will prevail."

That brings up the third question:

3. What about all those dumb things I've done? What about all those stupid decisions and bad choices? Those things that I regret and wish had never happened and I'd like to go back and do over?

Romans 8:28: "We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him and who have been called according to His purpose." We know that in all things God works for the good of those who love Him. It doesn't say in some things. It doesn't say in the good things. It says in all things.

It does not say that all things are good. No, not all things are good. There is a lot of evil and heartache in the world. I've experienced some of it and so have you. It says in all things God works for good. He can take evil and tragedies and turn them around and bring good out of them. He loves to turn crucifixions into resurrections.

The Bible says, in all things God works for the good. For everyone? No, this is not a promise for everybody in the whole world. It is a promise for those who love Him, those who are called according to His purpose. Only when you say, "Jesus Christ, I want to be Yours. I want to take all the pieces of my life and let You give me Your peace for my pieces. I want to give You all this."

Think about the biggest disappointment or hurt you've ever had. Or think about the thing you regret most in your life. Think about the dumbest thing you've ever done, your most unwise choice. Think about the most hurtful thing somebody else has done to you.

God saw it all before it ever happened. And He has found a way to weave it into His plan and purpose for your good, for your growth, and for His glory. What a God! He is good – all the time. No matter what you've gone through, whether it was your fault or somebody else's. God can use it for good if you give Him the pieces.

What are you afraid of? When you think about the future, what's your stomach in a knot about? When you think about the changes that are coming in your life, what is it that causes your back muscles and neck to tense up, or your face to feel flushed, or your mouth to go dry, because you wonder, "I don't know if I can handle this or not."

Regardless of what it is that's got you stressed out this morning, why don't you do what David did in Psalm 56:11: "I trust in God, so why should I be afraid?" Why should I be afraid? I trust in God. Then he says this, "God is our refuge and strength, a tested help [He's proven reliable] in times of trouble. And so we need not fear even if the world blows up [or Y2K causes some problems] and the mountains crumble into the sea." The truth is I don't know what the future holds. I don't know what the next millennium holds and either do you.

But I do know three things. And I know if I build my life on these three unchangeable facts, on these three islands of stability, I can handle enormous stress and change in my life. I know this:

- God will never stop loving me, even when I feel unlovable.
- God's Word is always true. It may not make sense. It may seem unreasonable and unpopular, but it is always the truth.
- God's purposes are greater than my problems.

Any time I start doubting these things – these three grand truths – I get myself in trouble. When I start doubting God's love, I start disobeying Him. When I start doubting God's Word, I tend to do my own thing. When I begin doubting that God has a purpose, I start saying "Why are all these problems happening to me? Why me? What's going on?" And I start doubting that God really is in control.

So if you want to face the future confidently and cope victoriously with change, all you need to do is respond. You see, it's not automatic. God offers us stability, but we must respond in order to activate His power in our lives.

3 Responses:

- Accept God's love
- Believe God's Word
- Commit to God's purpose

That's it. That's all you need for the new millennium. Accept God's love, believe God's Word, and commit to God's purpose and you will make it. You do these three things and you have no need to fear any of the changes that will come your way.

Pray this prayer in your heart right now. God will hear you.

Dear God, I realize there are many things in my life that are beyond my control. You know that sometimes I have a difficult time adjusting to all the difficult changes around me. I need Your stability in my life, Jesus. I want to start focusing on the things that will never change. Thank You that You will never stop loving me. Thank You so much. Today I accept Your love through Jesus Christ. Thank You for Your unchanging word. Help me to learn it and live by it. Thank You for making me for a purpose. In this next year, I want to get to know You better and Your plan for my life. I ask You to forgive me for the years that I've wasted, but I want to get

back on track today. I open up my life to You, dear Lord. Come in and take control.

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Malachi 3:10 Finding Worth in Your Work

Pastor Brian Bill 9/2/01

Three boys were bragging about who had the best dad. The first boy said, "My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a poem, and they give him \$100." The second boy jumps in and says, "That's nothing. My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a song, and they give him \$1,000." The third boy grins and says, "Oh, yeah? My dad scribbles a few words on a piece of paper, calls it a sermon, and it takes six men just to collect all the money!"

As we kick off a new series today called, Building For The Future, I'm mindful of the fact that there is some risk in talking about giving from the pulpit. I recognize that you've placed some trust in me as your pastor. My responsibility is to preach the full counsel of God, and when some things I say step on your toes or make you uncomfortable, I hope you know that my intention is not to hurt, but to help.

I'm putting that trust at risk because many of you feel threatened by the topic of money. Some of you have been in churches where you felt cajoled out of your cash. Some of you have felt pressured to give to a building campaign. Others of you have been turned off by televangelists who badger viewers to give until it hurts. I also understand that some of you are here for the first time today. And right about now you're looking for the exits. I'm risking that you'll walk out of here and never come back.

Let me come clean with you about my motivation for preaching this series.

1. The Bible has more to say about money than almost any other subject. For instance, there are more verses about money than about Heaven and Hell combined. Of the 38 parables Jesus told, 16 of them are about money. The Bible has fewer than 300 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith and over 2,000 verses that deal with wealth and possessions! The inescapable conclusion is that how we handle money in general, and what we give in particular, is a big deal to God. And so we need to talk about it, no matter how uncomfortable we may feel about it.

2. Giving will help us get where we're going as a church. Through the regular and sacrificial giving of many of you, PBC is able to fulfill our IMPACT marching orders in this community, this county, our country, and on the continents. And now, we have the opportunity to impact even more lives through the construction of the Family Life Center. If you're on our mailing list, you should be receiving a visit within the next week that will give you some exciting information about our Building for the Future campaign. If you'd like a copy of the letter that was mailed out two weeks ago, please pick one up in the hallway.

3. There are incredible benefits to giving. Whenever we do things God's way, we will experience His blessing. Malachi 3:10 says, "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 you will not have room enough for it."

Now, having given you my motivating factors for this series let me reiterate what I stated in my recent letter: "I promise that you will not receive any pressure to give during this campaign. Since God loves a cheerful giver we will not use any underhanded or emotional appeals just to get your money. You have my word on that."

Your Job Matters

On this Labor Day weekend, we give national tribute to the contributions that laborers have made to our country's strength and vitality. As we focus on Finding Worth in our Work, I came across some excuses you can use if your boss catches you asleep at your desk...

- They told me at the blood bank that this might happen.
- Whew! I must have left the top off the whiteout.
- This is in exchange for the six hours last night when I dreamt about work!
- Amen!

While you may get tired at your job, or even be tired of your job, the Bible teaches that work has intrinsic value for at least two reasons:

1. God is a worker. Most of us don't view God this way but that's how He first reveals Himself in Scripture. Genesis 1:1 states that God created the heavens and the earth. Genesis 2:2 calls this activity "work": "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing; so on the seventh day He rested from all his work." And He didn't stop working after creation. No wonder Psalm 111:2 declares: "Great are the works of the Lord; they are pondered by all who delight in them."

2. We are His co-workers. Not only is God a worker, but we are workers as well. Genesis 1:26 says that man is to "rule over" the creation. Genesis 2:15 states that Adam was placed in the garden to "work it and take care of it." I should point out that this work was given to Adam before the fall. God planted the garden and man cultivated it. This was a partnership that continues today. God gives to us and we manage what we've been given.

Tragically, with the entrance of sin in Genesis 3, this stewardship and partnership was distorted. Adam and Eve became self-centered, with the desire to take instead of give, to dominate instead of serve and to hate instead of love. In addition, because of the fall, in Genesis 3:17 God says that work would involve "painful toil." Verse 18 declares that work will no longer be completely efficient because the ground would "produce thorns and thistles." The challenge for us is to recognize that even though labor can be hard and challenging, we've been designed to work in tandem with God, not just for ourselves.

Someone once said, "Hard work never killed anyone, but why take the chance?" The Book of Proverbs has quite a bit to say about the importance of hard work:

- Proverbs 14:23: "All hard work brings a profit, but mere talk leads only to poverty."
- Proverbs 21:25: "The sluggard's craving will be the death of him, because his hands refuse to work."
- Proverbs 31:17 refers to a godly wife this way: "She sets about her work vigorously; her arms are strong for her tasks."

Why We Work

This morning we're going to look at two passages that were written years apart but contain essentially the same message. Please turn in your Bibles to Acts 20. Paul is on his third missionary journey and is headed to Jerusalem and eventually to Rome where he will end up in prison. On his way, verse 17 tells us that his boat pulls into the seaport city of Miletus where Paul asks for the elders from the church at Ephesus to come and meet him. It's almost like he has a layover at the airport and he invites some church leaders to meet with him before he has to catch the next plane!

During his farewell message, he reviewed his three years of ministry among them in verse 18-21. Next, in verses 22-27, he opens his heart by explaining that no matter what happens to him, he knows that he has "proclaimed the whole counsel of God." Finally, in the last section he challenges these men to shepherd the flock and to be ready to deal with false teaching that will arise.

I want to first draw your attention to verses 33-35: "I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: 'It is more blessed to give than to receive.'"

Now, keep your finger in this passage and turn over to Ephesians 4. Several years later, while Paul is in prison, he wrote this letter to the church at Ephesus. As I read verse 28, listen for similarities to what Paul said in Acts 20: "He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work, doing something useful with his own hands, that he may have something to share with those in need."

I see at least three helpful principles from these passages that will help us find worth in our work.

1. Work at being content. Acts 20:33 says that Paul did not covet anyone's silver or gold or clothing. It was not Paul's aim in life to get more money or more things. To covet means to have a consuming desire for what others have and for more of what we already have. It's interesting that in Ephesians 4:28, Paul warns people to stop stealing. When we covet, we break the last of the Ten Commandments, and in the process, we can end up breaking the other nine. If I covet something of yours, I may try to steal it so that I can have it for myself.

Stealing has a number of different faces. I love that Norman Rockwell painting which shows a woman buying a turkey. As the bird lies on the store scale, she is discreetly pushing up on the scale to make the turkey appear lighter, while the man is pushing down to make the scale read heavier.

In their book, *The Day America Told the Truth*, James Patterson and Peter Kim reveal some shocking statistics about how far people are willing to go for ten million dollars. When people were asked what they would do if they were guaranteed this much money, this is what they said:

- 25% would abandon their family
- 25% would abandon their faith
- 23% would become prostitutes for a week or more
- 16% would give up their U.S. citizenship
- 16% would leave their spouses
- 7% would kill a stranger

The importance of being content was illustrated this past week when four co-workers of one of the winners of the \$249 million Powerball jackpot went to court to demand a piece of the prize. The winner said she was “devastated” that her co-workers were suing her. According to her attorney, when she heard what they were doing, “She put her head on the table and sobbed. When I comforted her, her first words were, ‘Let them have the money.’” In this case, coveting led to conflict and ruptured relationships. Incidentally, the sin of coveting leads many people to play the lottery and participate in other forms of gambling.

Friends, we have to work hard at being content, don't we? Remember this, contentment is not having everything you want, it's wanting everything that you have. I love what G.K. Chesterton said, “There are two ways to get enough. One is to continue to accumulate more; the other is to desire less.”

Let's follow Paul's example and strive to be content. 1 Timothy 6:6-10 serves as a warning to us: “But godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil. Some people, eager for money, have wandered from the faith and pierced themselves with many griefs.”

Hebrews 13:5 challenges us to “Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, ‘Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.’” We like to quote the last part of this verse but forget that it's linked to contentment. Only when we grab hold of the fact that God will never leave us or forsake us, can we be at peace with what we have. The craving to covet or steal is really not a money issue; it's a faith issue. If we believe that God will take care of our needs and that He will never bail on us, we can trust Him with our lives and cultivate a spirit of contentment.

2. Work in order to have. In Acts 20:34, Paul describes how he worked hard with his hands in order to supply his own needs and the needs of his companions. He was a tentmaker, getting up early and staying up late in order to cut and sew. These tents were commonly made of leather, which was a difficult material to work with.

Our responsibility is to work hard so that we can take care of our needs and the needs of our family members. Ephesians 4:28 urges the one who was ripping others off to stop and begin working: “He who has been stealing must steal no longer, but must work...” This word for work literally means to “feel fatigue.” We're to throw ourselves into our jobs by doing something useful with our hands. One of the purposes of work is so that we can have what we need to live. 2 Thessalonians 3:10 says that “if a man will not work, he shall not eat.”

Work provides our food and shelter and also allows for us to take care of our companions, or family members. The Bible is very pointed in this regard in 1 Timothy 5:8: “If anyone does not provide for his relatives, and especially for his immediate family, he has denied the faith and is worse than an unbeliever.”

We're to work at being content. And we're to work in order to have. But there's a third purpose.

3. Work to have in order to give. Ephesians 4:28 states that we work so that “we have something to share with those in need.” The word “share” means to “give over or distribute.” Those in need are people who lack something. We work to have in order to share with others. Or, as someone has said, “We make a living by what we get and we make a life by what we give!”

Early in the 20th Century, Milton S. Hershey became one of the wealthiest men of his day. But working to amass wealth was not how Hershey defined his life. He measured his financial success in terms of what he could accomplish for others. He built a town that provided pleasant living conditions for his employees, a medical center, a family amusement park, and a school for

underprivileged children. Milton Hershey loved to make chocolate, but to him, work was primarily a means to serve God and provide enjoyment to others.

Working only to have is an American ideal, but it's not biblical. The most radical thing about this text is that we're commanded to do all our work with a view to meeting the needs of others. God is calling us to have a new attitude toward work. In our society, we usually think in terms of having a job so that we can have money to meet our needs and fulfill our desires. Because we've been made into new people through Christ, we need to view our jobs differently. When you get up and go to work, one of the main reasons you are going is so that you will be able to give part of your paycheck to someone else.

Actually, it's not our money that He asks us to share anyway. Psalm 24:1: "The earth is the Lord's, and everything in it, the world and all who live in it." It's God's money that is entrusted to us for His use, for our needs and the needs of our families, and for the needs of others.

We can live to have or we can live to give like Hershey did. This is counter-cultural and radically revolutionary. God wants to take your job and turn it into a work of grace. Ephesians 4 challenges us to not steal in the service of illegal greed and to not work in the service of legal greed. Everything is to be done out of grace, not greed. Don't covet or steal in order to have. Don't just work in order to have. But work in order to give.

Why? Because that's what it means to walk by faith. John Piper writes that the "very essence of faith is the delight of the soul in the experience and display of God's grace. Faith is the power, by grace, to be content with what we have. And faith is also the power, by grace, to be DISCONTENT with what others DON'T have." We don't have to steal or hoard to be happy. But we do need to give in order to be happy. Proverbs 22:9: "A generous man will himself be blessed, for he shares his food with the poor."

Paul models this kind of giving in Acts 20:35 when he writes, "In everything I did, I showed you by this kind of hard work we must help the weak..." The word "weak" means to be "feeble in any sense." Paul not only preached about what they should do, he lived it for the three years that he spent in Ephesus. He exhorted them and he was an example to them. He worked hard in order to help the weak, when he very easily could have coasted and thought only of himself.

Paul knows that this is a radical way to view their jobs, so he encourages them to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, "It is more blessed to give than to receive." This saying of Jesus is recorded nowhere else in the Bible but was evidently well known and quoted often by first century Christ-followers. This should not surprise us because not everything that Jesus said and did was written down in the Gospels. John 21:25: "Jesus did many other things as well. If every one of them were written down, I suppose that even the whole world would not have room for the books that would be written."

This teaching was so important that God made sure it was placed in the permanent record of Scripture. Jesus demonstrated the truth of this throughout His life as He gave and gave and gave. We could paraphrase verse 35 this way: It's better to share with others than to keep what you have and collect more. In other words, the blessing does not come in accumulating wealth, but in sharing it.

This is somewhat of a paradox, isn't it? At first glance, it seems better to receive. Just ask any kid sitting around the Christmas tree. But giving is better than getting for at least four reasons.

1. Givers experience deep satisfaction in knowing that they are participating in God's priorities. God is a giving God and He wants to use us to distribute His gifts to others. When you give to someone in need, they receive a gift from God through your hands and you become more like Him.

2. Generous givers find great joy in giving. Some of the happiest people I know are people who love to give and some of the grouchiest people I know are those who don't give at all. If you find your joy waning, look for ways to become a giver. To be "more blessed" means to become more happy or joyful.

3. Givers are thankful that they're in a position to give. People who practice the joy of giving recognize that all that they have is a gift from God. As they give some of it away, they are reminded that it's not really theirs in the first place. Many of you can testify that the more you give, the more God gives to you, which allows you to give even more.

4. Givers will be rewarded. When we give, we experience rewards right now, and we know that according to Matthew 6:20 we're also storing up treasures in heaven.

Application

Let me summarize this message in one sentence. If you want to find worth in your work, view your job as a calling, not just a career. A career can become the altar on which we sacrifice our lives in the pursuit of money and possessions. A calling involves recognizing that we are co-workers with God in accomplishing His purposes by being content, by working in order to have so that our needs can be met, and by working in order to give so that God can meet the needs of others through us.

Here are four possible ways that you can apply this message today.

1. Make a secret, sacrificial gift to someone this week.
2. Give to the Mercy Fund offering each month.
3. Do an inventory of your weekly giving to PBC.
4. Begin praying about your financial involvement in the Building For The Future campaign.

Communion

In the first part of Acts 20, those who were sailing with Paul got together with the other believers in Troas and “broke bread.” This time of communion served to help them remember the work that Jesus had done on their behalf. It also helped them remember how much Jesus had given to them through His death on the cross. Jesus viewed His work as a way to give to others.

When Jesus came to earth, He came as a worker. In fact, for most of His adult life He worked as a carpenter. But, He had a much more significant job assignment. His work was to do exactly what His Father wanted Him to do. In John 5:17, Jesus declared, “My Father is always at His work to this very day, and I, too, am working.” The primary work of Jesus was to come to earth and to die as our substitute on the cross. Because He completed the work that He was given to do, you and I can now experience the full benefits of His labor.

Labor Day provides a day off from work. Let it also be a reminder that we don’t have to work in order to please God. Jesus did it all for us. He paid the price. He completed the job He was given to do. And He now gives to us so that we can in turn give to others.

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Malachi 3:6-12 Proving God's Faithfulness

Pastor Brian Bill 6/1/03

One day a man called his church and said, “Can I speak to the head hog at the trough?”

The secretary thought she heard right but asked, “I’m sorry. Who would you like to speak with?” The caller repeated, “Can I speak to the head hog at the trough?”

The secretary answered, “Well, if you mean the preacher, then you may refer to him as ‘Pastor’ or ‘Brother,’” but I prefer you not call him the ‘head hog at the trough!’” The man replied, “Well, I was planning on giving \$100,000 to the building fund...”

To which the secretary quickly responded, “Hang on. I think the big fat pig just walked in.”

As we begin this morning, let me acknowledge that the church has gotten a bad rap for the perception that it is always asking for money. Caricatures of the clergy almost always involve some reference to making people feel guilty about giving. I just want to say that you can call me whatever animal you’d like if you’re ready to write a check for \$100,000! Just kidding.

I want you to know that I wrestle with speaking about giving because I realize the stakes are high. I know of at least one visitor who has not returned because we focused on this topic when we were kicking off our building campaign two years ago. Perhaps you’re visiting today and are already looking for the exit doors. Please don’t feel like we’re after your money because we’re not.

I do want to mention that our study in Malachi has really messed with me, as I’m sure it has with you. If you feel a bit beat up and

guilt-ridden, let me remind you that the very first message of Malachi is that God loves you. God sent His Son to deal with our guilt and shame. As we come to our theme today, let me say that the deacons have not put me up to this. I am not trying to manipulate you to give to any plan or program of PBC. As we've been going through this last book of the Old Testament verse-by-verse, this just happens to be the next topic.

Having said that, while I feel some ministerial awkwardness about stewardship sermons, I'm not apologizing about the subject matter today. How we manage money is directly linked to our discipleship. In fact, there are more verses in the Bible regarding our resources than about Heaven and Hell combined. Of the 38 parables Jesus told, 16 of them are about money. The Bible has fewer than 300 verses on prayer, less than 500 on faith and over 2,000 verses that deal with wealth and possessions! The inescapable conclusion is that how we deal with finances in general, and what we give in particular, is a big deal to God. And so we need to focus on our funds, no matter how uncomfortable we may feel about it.

Last week we concluded by establishing the fact that Jesus is a refining fire. He cleans us up because we're dirty. And He does His work in us so that He can see His image reflected through us. I want you to notice that one of the reasons He refines us is so that we can give offerings to God with pure motives. Look at Malachi 3:3-4: "Then the LORD will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness, and the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the LORD, as in days gone by, as in former years." Instead of giving their injured, crippled, and diseased animals, once they honor God's name, they will offer acceptable offerings. They will bring their best, not their worst.

My guess is that most all of us could stand a little refining in our attitudes toward offerings as well. We don't give in order to get. We give because of what we've been given. With that in mind, please turn to Malachi 3:6-12 where we will discover five features of grace giving.

Five Features of Grace Giving

1. Refocus on God's character (Malachi 3:6). As we've been learning in Malachi, our view of God determines everything else about us. If we consider Him weighty, we will live and give accordingly. If we see God as out to get us, then we'll be afraid and give only to appease His anger. And, if we don't think much of God at all, chances are we won't give much either. Malachi 3:6 helps us get refocused: "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." God is speaking in the first person. The word "Lord" literally means, "He who is" and refers to His immutability, or unchangeableness. The next phrase repeats and emphasizes this fact: "I the LORD do not change." To "not change" means that God can be counted on. He does not waver or falter because He is faithful.

Our only hope in life is this: God never changes. He is the one constant we can count on while everything around us moves and turns and shifts. Here's a working definition: "God does not, and cannot, change in His basic character." Nothing that God has ever said about Himself will be modified; nothing the inspired prophets and apostles have said about Him will be rescinded. All that God is, He has always been; and all that He has been, and is, He will ever be. We could use the word "always" to express this truth about God. God is always wise, always sovereign, always faithful, always just, always holy and always loving. Whatever God is, He always is. There are no "sometimes" attributes of God. All of His attributes are "always" attributes.

There are many verses in the Bible that teach this truth. Here are two:

- 1 Samuel 15:29: "He who is the Glory of Israel does not lie or change His mind; for He is not a man, that He should change His mind."
- James 1:17: "Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows."

I want you to notice that because God does not change, we can count on Him to keep His covenant with us. Specifically, the immutability of the Almighty is the guarantee of His grace. Look at the last part of Malachi 3:6: "So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." God could have legitimately wiped out His people because they had broken their part of the covenant.

Friends, do you see God as gracious and merciful? I'm convinced that many of us do not fully understand the depth of God's love. He does not change. You can count on Him. Psalm 78:38: "Yet he was merciful; he forgave their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath."

Because God does not change we can confidently count on three certainties:

- His promises never change. Romans 4:21: “Being fully persuaded that God had power to do what He had promised.”
- His purposes never change. Isaiah 14:24: “The Lord Almighty has sworn, ‘Surely, as I have planned, so it will be, and as I have purposed, so it will stand.’”
- His personality never changes. Hebrews 6:18: “God did this so that, by two unchangeable things in which it is impossible for God to lie...”

That leads to a second truth. Because God does not change, God’s people can change.

2. Return wholeheartedly to God (Malachi 3:7). The first part of Malachi 3:7 is a summary statement of the fickleness of the followers of God down through the centuries: “Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them.” They, like us, have turned away, which literally means, “to turn off.”

The warning God gave them in Deuteronomy 31:20 had proven true: “When I have brought them into the land flowing with milk and honey, the land I promised on oath to their forefathers, and when they eat their fill and thrive, they will turn to other gods and worship them, rejecting me and breaking my covenant.” When our needs are met we often turn away from God, don’t we? Instead of keeping God’s Word in front of us, we try to push it out of the way as was done in Nehemiah 9:26: “But they were disobedient and rebelled against you; they put your law behind their backs.”

And yet, despite how we live and what we do, God graciously calls out with words that reveal His longing for relationship. Look at the next phrase in Malachi 3:7: “Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty.” To return means to turn back to what we know is true. The door to blessing starts when we turn back. You can hear God’s desire to have all of us in Hosea 14:1: “Return, O Israel, to the LORD your God. Your sins have been your downfall!” And, when we turn back, even if it’s just a small step, God promises to meet us. James 4:8: “Come near to God and he will come near to you.” One of my favorite verses is found in Jeremiah 3:22: “Return, faithless people; I will cure you of backsliding.”

You would think they would want to return to their Redeemer, especially since He promised to restore the relationship and even cure their wandering hearts. But, once again, God’s people haven’t changed much over the centuries. Instead of returning wholeheartedly, they deny that they even have a problem. Look at the last part of Malachi 3:7: “But you ask, ‘How are we to return?’”

They are not asking for some practical ways that they can step it up spiritually. This is now the sixth time in the book where they have responded like smart alecks. The New Living Translation captures their denial: “How can we return when we have never gone away?” They don’t think they’ve done anything wrong. How can they come back when they’ve never left? How can they repent if they’re not guilty of any sin?

The first step back is to ask, like the prodigal son did when he was in the pigpen, “How did I get here?” Friend, listen carefully. The first place to start is to admit that you’ve departed. You might not have left on purpose. Perhaps it’s just been a slow drift. Most of us don’t decide to rebel but over time, we neglect this and neglect that and start doing something that isn’t good, and after awhile we recognize how far we’ve fallen. Do you want to return wholeheartedly? If so, then admit that you need to.

The second step is this: “How do I get back home?” What do I need to do? What changes do I need to make? What path do I need to take? Malachi’s message was a call to return. One way to return is to step up our offerings.

3. Realize the importance of giving (Malachi 3:8-10a). Look at Malachi 3:8: “Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, ‘How do we rob you?’ In tithes and offerings.” The word “rob” here means to “take forcibly.” The people didn’t like this accusation. How could they be stealing from God? The reason God says that they are robbing Him is that they had begun to take what belonged to Him and kept it for themselves. They had lost sight of the fact that God owns everything. Deuteronomy 10:14: “To the LORD your God belong the heavens, even the highest heavens, the earth and everything in it.”

As a way to recognize God’s rightful rule and omnipotent ownership of all things, God’s people in the Old Testament were instructed to give tithes and offerings. This word literally means “a tenth,” or 10%. While some would say that this teaching is based on the Law, let me remind you that Abraham practiced tithing 400 years before the Law was even established in Genesis 14:20 when he gave a tenth of everything he owned to the priest Melchizedek. Deuteronomy 12:11, which is part of the Law, challenges God’s people to bring their tithes and special gifts to the place of God’s choosing.

The people of Israel did not just give one tithe. First, they were required to bring a tenth of all produce and livestock, or the financial equivalent, into the Temple for distribution among the Israelites. The Levites then gave a portion of their tithe to the priests. Second,

they were to bring another tithe during special feast days. Third, adults were required to pay a half shekel whenever a census was taken.

Failure to tithe properly could have included not giving at all, withholding part of it, or not giving at the proper time. Whatever the reason, because they had been robbing God, verse 9 says that the whole nation was under a curse. That reminds us of what God said in Amos 4:9. Even when He sends problems, it's in order to get us to return to Him wholeheartedly: "Many times I struck your gardens and vineyards, I struck them with blight and mildew. Locusts devoured your fig and olive trees, yet you have not returned to me, declares the LORD."

When we grovel about giving or withhold what is His, we are robbing God of His right to use us to propel His purposes in the world. Look at the first part of verse 10: "Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house..." The storehouse was the chamber in the Temple where the tithes and offerings were kept. Let me make three summary statements about the application of tithing for today.

- While we are no longer under the Law, tithing is a good benchmark for believers. In other words, it's a good place to start, sort of like a "minimum guide" for giving. J. Vernon McGee refers to it as a yardstick by which we can measure ourselves.
- It's easy to tithe and yet miss out on what's really important. Jesus took the Pharisees to task not because they didn't tithe, but because they had become so legalistic that they no longer cared about their love for God or for their neighbor. Luke 11:42: "Woe to you Pharisees, because you give God a tenth of your mint, rue and all other kinds of garden herbs, but you neglect justice and the love of God. You should have practiced the latter without leaving the former undone." God looks at the heart, not the hand. He focuses on the giver, not the gift because the attitude is more important than the amount.
- The practice of tithing is a good reminder of who's in charge of my life. When I give at least 10%, it's a way to be reminded that God owns everything that I have. God wants what my money represents—me. When giving to God, we're just taking our hands off what belongs to Him in the first place. My use of money shows what I think of Him because my giving is a thermometer of my love. Joe Stowell writes, "it's not so much what you have but, rather, what has you that makes all the difference" (From the foreword to "A Biblical Theology of Material Possessions," by Gene Getz).

I don't have time to give a full picture of what the entire Bible teaches about giving but let me quickly draw three more principles from just one verse in the New Testament. Since we are not under the Law, it's essential that we understand giving in an age of grace. Having said that, in general, the New Testament heightens, rather than lessens the teachings of the Old Testament. 1 Corinthians 16:2: "On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income..."

- Giving should be punctual. The Bible says that believers are to give on a regular basis: "On the first day of the week."
- Giving should be personal. Giving is something that is inherently individualistic. It's between you and God what you give. At the same time, the Bible makes it clear that every believer is to give: "each one of you." Giving is not just a suggestion. God expects each of us to be givers.
- Giving should be proportional. We are to give according to how God has blessed us. The believer is to set aside "a sum of money in keeping with his income." Proportional giving means that the more God blesses us, the more we're able to give. That's New Testament grace giving, which may involve more than just giving 10%. According to Malachi, the more you give, the more you are blessed. 1 Corinthians teaches that the more you're blessed, the more you can give. Someone put it this way: "Give according to your income, lest God make your income according to your giving." The Old Testament gives a command to tithe by setting a standard of percentage giving. In the New Testament the command becomes a model as we're urged to practice proportional giving. The emphasis is on liberality, not limitation.

Ultimately, when we give we are saying that we trust God to take care of our needs. That leads to the next feature of giving from the middle section of verse 10: "Test me in this, says the LORD Almighty..."

4. Relinquish control by trusting God (Malachi 3:10b). Here's another way to say it. When we give at least 10% of our income to God, we're saying that we trust Him to enable us to live on the other 90%. Jesus put it this way in Matthew 6:33: "But seek first His kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well." Researcher Sylvia Ronsvalle, after studying giving patterns among Christians, concluded by saying, "If you want to know what we learned in 25 words or less, giving is down because we don't love God as much as we love a lot of other stuff" ("Salt of the Earth," July/August 1997).

Malachi 3:10 is the only place in the Bible where God tells us to test Him. To “test” means to investigate or prove something as true. It doesn’t sound right, does it? We’re warned about not putting God to the test and yet when it comes to giving, God invites us to test Him because the real issue is not money, but trust. When we decide to give a percentage of our income to the Lord, we then have the opportunity to trust His faithfulness to meet all of our needs. Or, we could put it like this: When we first give ourselves to the Lord, all other giving is easy.

God is saying, “I dare you! Test me in this way to see if I really exist or not.” Listen to the New Living Translation: “Try it! Let me prove it to you!” This is one of the most amazing verses in the entire Bible. He allows Himself to be put on trial. He didn’t have to make this promise. He could have simply told us to give 10% because He demands it and that’s that. But He wanted us to get to know Him in a much deeper way. Is God alive? Is He real? Does He love me? Will He keep His promises? One of the best ways to find out is to start tithing.

Many years ago, when I was an intern at a church in the Chicago suburbs, we launched a campaign to pay off the mortgage on the building. We had banners around the church that had just two words on them: “Prove Me.” It was during this emphasis that Beth and I cemented our commitment to tithe and we’ve never regretted it. I’ll never forget the joy that took place as we watched God bring in the finances so that we could retire the mortgage. I still remember the Sunday when we burned the note from the bank during a worship service. I can’t wait for that to happen here when we finally pay off the Family Life Center so that we can begin building a new worship center!

5. Rejoice in God’s blessings (Malachi 3:10c-12). Look with me at the last part of verse 10 through verse 12: “...and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit, says the LORD Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land, says the LORD Almighty.” This week I interviewed several people by asking them to simply tell me what came to their minds when I said the word, “tithing.” Here are some of their responses: “Do it. It works. Joy. Worship. Blessing.” It almost makes me feel sorry for those who don’t use the tithe as a yardstick for giving. They don’t know what they’re missing!

God says that He will open wide the river of heaven and will blow us away with His blessings. The phrase “floodgates” is used in Genesis 7:11 where we read what happened when God started to flood the earth with water: “...on that day all the springs of the great deep burst forth, and the floodgates of the heavens were opened.” The phrase, “so much blessing” means that God will give us more than enough. The world says the more you take the more you have. God says, the more you give, the more you are. Corrie Ten Boom put it this way: “The measure of a life is not its duration, but its donation.”

Proverbs 3:9-10 sheds some additional insight into how God rewards those who honor Him: “Honor the LORD with your wealth, with the first fruits of all your crops; then your barns will be filled to overflowing, and your vats will brim over with new wine.”

The word, “pour” in Malachi 3:10 means to “to make empty.” When we trust God with our giving, He will empty His bucket of blessings on us and we’ll barely be able to stand it! We’ll feel like we don’t have any more room to hold everything that God gives us. Proverbs 11:24: “One man gives freely, yet gains even more; another man withholds unduly, but comes to poverty.” Proverbs 22:9: “A generous man will himself be blessed...” God is saying, “I dare you to try and exhaust me with your giving.”

Blessings come to those who tithe and amazingly, Malachi 3:11 states that God will keep certain bad things from happening when we give Him our first fruits. When I give, I put myself in a position to trust God to meet all my needs. In addition, God declares in verse 12 that His plan for global evangelization will be met. Can you imagine what would happen to the cause of missions if every believer would give at least 10% to kingdom purposes?

Application

Let me close with three application points.

1. Audit your giving. Take some time to sit down and determine how much you’ve been giving to the Lord. One sermon I read this week had a great title: “Cirrhosis of the Giver.” George Barna, an evangelical researcher, just revealed the most current statistics about giving (“Barna Update,” 5/19/03).

- The proportion of Christians who tithe dropped by 62% in the past year.
- On average, believers give less than 3% of their income to the local church.
- Just 6% of evangelicals tithed to their church in 2002.

2. Take the tithing challenge. I wonder if some of you are ready to take God up on His tithing test. Here's an idea. Why not determine to tithe this summer? For the months of June, July, and August, give like you've never given before. Ask God to prove Himself. Stop if you'd like in September, but my guess is that you won't want to. I believe God will pour out His blessings in ways you have never experienced before.

3. Get out of debt. I know that some of you want to give more but you feel strapped because of the mountain of debt that you're under. If you need some help in this area, we've included some information in the bulletin about Crown ministries. You can find a budget calculator on their web site and they can put you in touch with a financial counselor (www.crown.org). Ron Blue gives some helpful advice in his book called, "The Debt Squeeze: How Your Family Can Become Financially Free." Let me share the five steps he offers to help get out of financial bondage:

- Transfer ownership to God.
- Determine where you are.
- Make a commitment to stop going into debt. This may require "plastic surgery."
- Develop a repayment plan.
- Establish accountability.

One of my friends from college became a Christian the year after I did. He is totally sold out to Christ. Unbelievably, he and his wife not only tithe, but they give an extra 1% of their income each year to missions. That means that every year, their total giving goes up by 1%! When Beth and I were getting ready to go to Mexico as missionaries seven years ago, he took me aside and told me, with tears of joy in his eyes, that he and his wife want to get to the point where they can give an extra tithe to God's global work. He then told me how much they were pledging to give to our family for our work in Mexico. I want you to know that I will never forget this. But it isn't the amount I'll remember, it's the joy on his face as he shared their excitement about being able to give!

Communion: As we focus on communion, let's remember what God has given to us in His Son: 2 Corinthians 9:15: "Thanks be to God for his indescribable gift!"

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Malachi 3:13-18 Serving to the End

Pastor Brian Bill 6/8/03

A man stopped by a house with a sign out front that said, "Talking Dog For Sale." The owner directed him to the backyard to see the dog. He was pretty skeptical and called out, "You talk?" "Yep," the mutt replied. The man then said, "So, what's your story?"

The dog looked up and said, "Well, I discovered this gift when I was young and I wanted to help the government so I went to work for the CIA. I jetted around from country to country. I've spied on world leaders because no one ever figured a dog could eavesdrop. I was one of their most valuable agents. I uncovered some incredible secrets and was awarded a bunch of medals. I had a wife, a mess of puppies, and now I'm just retired."

The guy couldn't believe his ears! Who ever heard of a dog that talked? He was already thinking of ways he could use an eavesdropping dog. He turned to the owner and said, "How much do you want for him?" The owner replied, "Ten dollars." To which the man replied, "Your dog is amazing. Can I ask why you're selling him so cheap?" The owner just shook his head and said, "Because he's a big liar!"

That reminds me of the older gentleman who had serious hearing problems for over 10 years. He finally went to the doctor and was fitted for a set of hearing aids that enabled him to hear perfectly. On his follow-up visit a month later, the doctor said, "Your hearing is now at 100%. Your family must be really pleased that you can hear again." To which the man replied, "Oh, I haven't told my family yet. I just sit around and listen to conversations. I've ended up changing my will three times."

As we come to our passage today, it's helpful to think of God as eavesdropping on some conversations. He's listening in as two groups of people are talking. The first group is speaking against Him; the other speaks in awe of the Almighty. Group #1 looked around and complained. Group #2 looked up and comprehended. And God heard it all.

Group #1: Looked Around and Complained

Please turn in your Bible to Malachi 3:13-15 and follow along as I read from the Message Translation.

God says, "You have spoken hard, rude words to me." You ask, "When did we ever do that?" "When you said, 'It doesn't pay to serve God. What do we ever get out of it? When we did what he said and went around with long faces, serious about God-of-the-Angel-Armies, what difference did it make? Those who take life into their own hands are the lucky ones. They break all the rules and get ahead anyway. They push God to the limit and get by with it.'"

These people were lodging three complaints against God.

1. We've said nothing wrong (13). Their first complaint against God is that they've done nothing wrong. Look at verse 13: "You have said harsh things against me, says the Lord." God is saying that His people have been openly obstinate with Him. The King James Version uses the phrase, "You have been stout against me." Once again, for the seventh and final time in the book, the people deny that they have a problem: "What have we said against you?"

As God eavesdrops, notice that He doesn't say that the people are saying strong words to Him, but rather against Him. The form of the verb "said" means "to speak to one another in conversation." They were talking to each other about their complaints against God. And yet, when they're confronted with this, they're quick to deny that they've done anything wrong.

Have you ever noticed how easy it is to find people who will agree with our complaints? We're attracted to those who are sympathetic to our feelings. When we grumble against God we want others to grumble with us.

2. Serving is useless (14). In verse 14, God tells them in no uncertain terms what their next complaint is: "You have said, 'It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?'" When God dealt with their denial it had to be very disarming. They must have thought God could not hear what they were saying. They were basically saying that worshipping, tithing, and serving had no purpose. It was all empty, vain and useless. The word "profit" is a technical term used for a weaver cutting a piece of cloth free from the loom. As used here it has the negative connotation of someone expecting his or her "cut" or percentage, as a hit man would demand for his work. This reveals a consumer mentality: What will I get out of this? What's in it for me?

These murmurers are complaining because even when they mourned before the Lord it was of no benefit. They had kept the outward appearance of the Law and wondered why things were not going better for them. Their thoughts were very similar to what we read in Isaiah 58:3: "Why have we fasted...and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and you have not noticed?" When they were involved in ministry it didn't matter. They were echoing the sentiment we find in Job 21:15: "Who is the Almighty, that we should serve him? What would we gain by praying to him?"

This complaint still rears its ugly head in our hearts today. Some of us have stopped serving because we don't see any benefit. Perhaps you have been trying to do the right thing and it feels futile to keep it up. Don't bail on doing your duty. Keep it up. Don't lose heart. The Lord's work is definitely worth it! 1 Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my dear brothers, stand firm. Let nothing move you. Always give yourselves fully to the work of the Lord, because you know that your labor in the Lord is not in vain."

I wonder if you and I have made serving more difficult than it needs to be. God has designed us on purpose to be involved in His purposes. Let's listen in on a conversation that may hit uncomfortably close to home.

Drama: Somebody's Got to Do It

Friend, ministry doesn't have to hurt for it to count! In fact, serving is extremely satisfying because that's what we've been designed to do. You and I were put on the earth to make a contribution. We are saved to serve, healed to help, and blessed in order to be a blessing. God has a ministry for you in His church and a mission for you in the world. Having said that, some of us are more interested in "serve us" than service because serving goes against our natural inclination to put ourselves first.

We'll learn more about this when we participate in the 40 Days of Purpose this fall, but let me give a summary of the significance of serving God. Ephesians 2:10: "We are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus to do good works." The simple acrostic SHAPE helps us remember five factors of serving:

Spiritual Gifts – special God-empowered abilities for serving that are given to believers.

Heart – that which motivates you; what you care most about.

Abilities – natural talents that you are born with.

Personality – affects how and where you use your spiritual gifts.

Experience – what we've gone through in the past prepares us for ministry today.

In his autobiography, Warren Wiersbe writes: "If life is to have meaning, and if God's will is to be done, all of us have to accept who we are and what we are, give it back to God, and thank Him for the way He made us. What I am is God's gift to me; what I do with it is my gift to Him." Ministry is anything but futile; we can be fruitful and fulfilled when we serve according to our shape! If you are not serving, you don't know what you're missing! I encourage you to plug into a place that is designed just for you.

3. God is not fair (15). Their third grievance is that, in their minds, God is not fair. Look at verse 15: "But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape." As they look around they see the proud prospering, and they don't like it one bit. They wonder why evil people evade trouble while those who serve God end up getting the short end of the stick. Before we get too tough on them for railing against God's justice, don't we often do the same thing?

This complaint is very similar to Asaph's concerns in Psalm 73. Verse 3 tells us why he almost went spiritually AWOL: "For I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked." The word "arrogant" comes from a root word that means a loud and clear noise. The idea is that a proud person is one who toots his own horn real loud. It's also used of the braying of a donkey. Notice that Asaph is not upset with the arrogant or the wicked, he's jealous of them. He wants what they have.

The word "prosperity" doesn't do justice to the original term: shalom, which means "completion" or "fulfillment" and was often used to describe peace, wholeness, harmony and physical well-being. Why should the wicked have everything that was only promised to God's covenant people? God, this isn't fair! They're basically saying, "Since God has forgotten us, let's forget Him."

In verses 4-5 the psalmist wonders why life seems so good for those who have nothing to do with God: "They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills." They live in the fast lane but don't seem to crash and burn. Their life appears painless and easy.

Friends, when we deny that we do or say anything wrong, we will eventually stop serving God. And, when we disengage from our purpose, we will inevitably end up questioning the very justice of God.

I'm thankful that God always has His remnant. Even though there are those who say harsh things against Him, there are others who speak of His holiness. If you see a little bit of yourself in the first group, I encourage you to join the conversation in Group #2.

Group #2: Looked Up and Comprehended

Follow along in your copy of the Scriptures as I read the final section of Malachi 3 from the Message: "Then those whose lives honored God got together and talked it over. God saw what they were doing and listened in. A book was opened in God's presence and minutes were taken of the meeting, with the names of the God-fearers written down, all the names of those who honored God's name. God-of-the-Angel-Armies said, 'They're mine, all mine. They'll get special treatment when I go into action. I treat them with the same consideration and kindness that parents give the child who honors them. Once more you'll see the difference it makes between being a person who does the right thing and one who doesn't, between serving God and not serving him.'"

We see two key elements that make up this collective of committed believers:

- Their character: they exalted God.
- Their conduct: they edified each other.

Let's look first at their character as described in the beginning of verse 16: "Then those who feared the Lord..." To "fear" God is to hold Him in awe, to revere Him. To fear the Lord is to tremble at the thought of offending Him in any way. He is not to be trifled with. He is a consuming fire and we should tremble in His presence. Instead of laying some awful charges against the Almighty, they declared Him to be awesome. 1 Samuel 12:24: "But be sure to fear the LORD and serve him faithfully with all your heart; consider what great things he has done for you." While God invites us to call Him "friend," sometimes we lose sight of the fact that He is also to be feared.

A.W. Tozer said that to know God is to fear Him and to be "stunned" by the splendor of His presence. God is not there just to meet our needs. We are here to bow before His supremacy in an attitude of holy fear so that we will worship Him with our ways and our words. We hear the longing of God in Deuteronomy 5:29: "Oh, that their hearts would be inclined to fear me and keep all my commands always, so that it might go well with them and their children forever!"

The "fear of the Lord" can involve two things. One is that God might hurt us. The other is the fear that we might hurt Him by our behavior; that we should run away from Him by seeking refuge, joy and hope elsewhere. The word "fear" can refer to reverence or

respect, but I wonder if this definition goes far enough. Philippians 2:12 challenges us to “work out our salvation with fear and trembling.” Most of us could stand to tremble more in the presence of God. He’s not just the big guy in the sky, or the man upstairs. He’s the Lord of Hosts, the Most High God, the King of Kings, Lord of Lords, and the Almighty who is holy, holy, holy.

The remnant in Malachi 3 was in tune with the character of God and their conduct was such that instead of leveling charges against Him, they got together in order to edify each other: “Then those who feared the Lord talked together...” They met to mention what God had done for them. Psalm 66:16: “Come and listen, all you who fear God; let me tell you what he has done for me.” They shared. They opened up. They encouraged. They confessed. They cried. And they prayed. In short, they experienced a biblically functioning community, which employed both the vertical and horizontal elements. Those who are spiritually alive will seek out others of like commitment with whom to fellowship. Let me give you an action step. In the course of every conversation you have, work at interjecting the name of God and look for ways to build your friend’s faith.

Do you have friends who will do that for you? When you get together with them, do you come away with a deeper reverence for God and are you built up spiritually? Proverbs 13:20: “He who walks with the wise grows wise, but a companion of fools suffers harm.” If you don’t have a platoon of godly influencers, can I encourage you to plug into a small group or join one of the Bible Studies available at PBC? If you are always around people who have no use for God, and spend most of your time complaining about Him and others, then it’s very easy to eventually become indifferent to spiritual matters yourself. It’s imperative that we have people who will build us up, not tear us down.

As we’ve been learning from the Book of Malachi, each of us, if we’re not careful, are prone to wander. We tend to slide south spiritually if we don’t consciously look for ways to step it up. We must take responsibility to help each other stay focused on the fear of God and enable others to turn from temptation. Hebrews 3:13 reminds us that we are our brother’s keeper: “But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin’s deceitfulness.” If we try to do the Christian life solo, sin will harden and deceive us. We need each other.

That’s why God is so sold on Christians making a commitment to the community of faith in Hebrews 10:24-25: “And let us consider how we may spur one another on toward love and good deeds. Let us not give up meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing, but let us encourage one another-and all the more as you see the Day approaching.”

Once we exalt God and edify one another, we’ll comprehend 5 aspects of God’s character in Malachi 3:16-17.

1. The Lord listens to us: “...and the Lord listened and heard.” Isn’t it tough to keep talking when you sense that no one is listening? The Lord locks in and listens when His people honor Him. The word “listen” means to prick up the ears. It has the idea of God leaning forward so that He can take in everything that is being said about Him. Psalm 33:18 says that the eyes of the Lord are on those who fear Him and Psalm 34:15 reminds us that his ears are attentive to the cry of the righteous. When we turn to God, He tunes in to our frequency.

One commentator put it this way: “The ears of God strained to hear what the remnant were saying. Kings were making edicts, but God was listening to His people. Generals were giving orders, but God was listening to a handful of folks who feared His name; His ears were tuned to His faithful followers.” God sees, knows, and hears everything. He saw the cork fly out of Sammy’s bat and yet, He eavesdrops on those who exalt Him.

Some of us don’t want God hearing what we say because we’d be embarrassed by what comes out of our mouths. Let’s focus on fearing Him so that He leans forward to hear and hearken. Psalm 34:9 promises that those who fear the Lord will lack no good thing. Let’s invite God into our conversations and pepper our words with praise and worship.

2. The Lord remembers us: “A scroll of remembrance was written in His presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honored His name.” The idea of God keeping a written record appears as early as the book of Exodus (32:32). Perhaps the most beautiful expression of this is in Isaiah 49:16: “See, I have engraved you on the palms of my hands.”

A scroll of remembrance is a wonderful figure taken from the culture of that day. Kings kept a register of everyone who was loyal to the throne. In the Book of Esther, we read that when King Xerxes had a sleepless night, he called for the book of records and discovered that Mordecai had delivered him from a coup and had never been rewarded. When he saw Mordecai’s name, he made sure that he was compensated for his commitment to the king (see Esther 6:1-11).

I find it very comforting to know that God captures every one of our tears and puts them in a bottle. Listen to Psalm 56:8 in the New

King James Version: "You number my wanderings; Put my tears into Your bottle; Are they not in Your book?" God does not forget your fears. He cares about your crying. He locks into your lament.

Actually, God doesn't need to look in a book to remember you. The only thing He forgets about you is your sin. But, he does keep a book of the names of those who have put their faith in Jesus. They are forever etched into the Lamb's Book of Life as viewed by John in Revelation 20:12: "And I saw the dead, great and small, standing before the throne, and books were opened. Another book was opened, which is the book of life. The dead were judged according to what they had done as recorded in the books."

3. The Lord claims us: "They will be mine, says the Lord Almighty." The word "mine" is emphatic. Those who fear Him belong to Him. I love the tenderness that exudes from Jeremiah 32:38-41: "They will be my people, and I will be their God. I will give them singleness of heart and action, so that they will always fear me for their own good and the good of their children after them. I will make an everlasting covenant with them: I will never stop doing good to them, and I will inspire them to fear me, so that they will never turn away from me. I will rejoice in doing them good and will assuredly plant them in this land with all my heart and soul."

Have you ever stopped to savor the fact that if you have put your faith in Jesus, you no longer belong to yourself? You have a different owner. 1 Corinthians 6:19-20: "You are not your own; you were bought at a price. Therefore honor God with your body." Peter captures this perfectly when he writes in 1 Peter 2:9: "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light."

4. The Lord treasures us: "In the day when I make up my treasured possession." The King James Version says, "They will be mine on the day that I make up my jewels." That's a good translation because the word "possession" means "a valued treasure." These words were quoted at the inauguration of the covenant in Exodus 19:5: "Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession."

Do you know that God treasures you? He is crazy about you. You matter to Him far more than you know. Allow the truth of Isaiah 62:3 to soak into your spirit: "You will be a crown of splendor in the LORD's hand, a royal diadem in the hand of your God." And listen to the love that God has for you in Zephaniah 3:17: "The LORD your God is with you, he is mighty to save. He will take great delight in you, he will quiet you with his love, he will rejoice over you with singing."

5. The Lord spares us: "I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares His son who serves Him." Because He listens to us, remembers us, claims us, and treasures us, He promises to spare us. Because God is just, we deserve justice. But because He is merciful, we don't receive what we deserve. In fact, we receive much more than we deserve – that's called grace. Aren't you thankful that God did not spare His Son? Because He was sacrificed in our place, we are now free. Romans 8:32: "He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things?"

Making a Distinction

As we wrap up this morning, can I ask you a question? Which group are you in? Are you looking around and complaining, or are you looking up and comprehending? As God eavesdrops on our lives, He makes a distinction between those who know Him and those who do not. We see this in the last verse of Malachi 3: "And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not." The Bible makes it clear that there is no middle ground. We're either...

- Saved or Lost
- Alive in Christ or Dead in our sins
- In the Light or in the Darkness
- In the Kingdom of the Son or in the Kingdom of Satan
- On the road to Heaven or on the highway to Hell

If you're not sure what group you're in, let me encourage you to stop denying your guilt before a holy God. Recognize that serving the Savior is the only thing that matters and come to grips with the fact that God is fair in all His dealings with us.

It's time to look up and comprehend that...

- The Lord listens to you
- The Lord remembers you

- The Lord claims you
- The Lord treasures you
- The Lord wants to spare you

God has done so much for us! Romans 2:4 reminds us that we need to respond to His grace and mercy in order to activate it in our lives: "Or do you show contempt for the riches of his kindness, tolerance and patience, not realizing that God's kindness leads you toward repentance?" Friend, allow God's kindness to move you to repentance right now.

Turn back to verse 16 for a moment. I want you to notice that once the people decided to exalt God and edify one another, they did something to help them remember their commitment: "A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name." They put their names on the line. Will you commit yourself to believe right now and then will you publicly acknowledge that from this point on, you will serve the Lord until the end? I'm going to lead you in a prayer of salvation. If what I pray reflects what's in your heart, please pray along with me silently and then when we're done I'm going to give you an opportunity to come down front and sign your name in this booklet. When you do, I will give you this booklet and a helpful book that will help you get started in your walk with Jesus.

"Lord Jesus, I can no longer deny that I am not doing what I should. I admit that I'm a sinner and that I've been serving myself and not you. I believe that you paid the price for my sins and that you listen, remember, claim and treasure me. And now I want you to spare me. I turn from the way I've been living and invite you to come into my life. I receive you as my Savior and my Lord, my Forgiver and Leader. If there's anything in my life that you don't like, get rid of it and help me to exalt you and edify those around me as I serve you to the end. Amen.