

October 5, 2008

Pastor Russell Lackey
www.reflutheran.org
Malachi 3:6-13

Return to Me

"I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. 7 Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' 8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings. 9 You are under a curse—the whole nation of you—because you are robbing me. 10 Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it. 11 I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not cast their fruit," says the LORD Almighty. 12 "Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land," says the LORD Almighty.

If you have been a Christian for any length of time, you know that Malachi 3 is use primarily during Stewardship drives. In fact, when I told my dad I was preaching on Malachi 3, he said, "You must be preaching about giving to the church." I told him, "Not this Sunday; next Sunday."

Today's question is not about money. Today's question is where do you turn when things are going bad?

This week I received a phone call from a friend who is frustrated with the financial markets. We talked for a while. We shared our thoughts and frustrations. Our conversation moved to faith. At the end, we said our goodbyes and that was it. However, I felt better from the conversation. We did not fix the markets. We did not fix our frustrations. However, in the consolation of the brethren, we were fixed.

Where do you turn when things are going bad?

In our reading from Malachi, we discover that the people were in a bad place. There was drought, gross immorality, exploitation of the poor, ignorance among the people, and profane worship. It sounds a lot like modern day America. The worship was so bad that God says in chapter 1, "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar!" (1:10). Even worse, instead of turning to God, the people turned away from God. Malachi 3 says:

"Ever since the time of your forefathers you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty. "But you ask, 'How are we to return?' 8 "Will a man rob God? Yet you rob me. "But you ask, 'How do we rob you?' "In tithes and offerings" (3:7-8).

The problem for Israel was that as things went bad, the people offered impure offerings (1:13) & began to oppress the poor (3:5). Instead of offering a pure lamb, they offered a lamb that was blind or lame. Who would know? Instead of offering the first fruits to God, they offered the scrapes. Instead of taking care of the poor, they held everything close to their vest.

Now, the issue is not the offering. The issue is the heart behind it. The people did not trust that God would take care of them. They did not want to part with the best because they were afraid that God would not give them more. They did not trust that God actually loved them. In fact, the book of Malachi begins with God saying, "I have loved you." But you say, "How have you loved us?" (1:2). In their moment of despair, the people turned away from God.

Before we cast too much blame on them, we should look at ourselves. It is easy to question God's love when finances go astray. How many of you have experienced worry this past week over the financial markets? How many of you have wondered about God's provision? How many of you have "lost sleep babysitting the world and its' problems?" (Robert Frost). Many of us have.

There is a poem written by Charles Peguy entitled "Sleep." In it, God speaks and says:

"Sleep is perhaps the most beautiful thing I have created. And I myself rested on the seventh day." The poem goes on to say, "Poor people, they don't know what is good. They look after their business very well during the day. But they haven't enough confidence in me to let me look after it during the night. As if I wasn't capable of looking after it during one night..."

As financial markets go, so too does our faith. We worry. We lose sleep. I am the pastor of this church and I worry. I worry about gas prices. I worry about being on one income. I worry about the price of milk. Even more, I feel guilty for not being a better steward. I feel shame for wondering if God will really provide. I know he does, but the sinner in me struggles. I question God's love.

What is God to do with us? What is God to do with a people who turn away from him? Martin Luther once said, "If I were God, I'd blow the world to bits." Is that what God needs to do? Many people think God needs to get tough with us. Does this ever really work? Israel never really changed their ways. Commands get our attention. They rarely grab our hearts.

I came across a letter a child wrote to God. It said:

Dear GOD, My mom told me that you said we have to love our enemies. My mom also told me that you said, "do unto others as they do unto you"? Which one is it? I hope it is the second, because I really want to fix my brother. Love, Darla.

Commands get our attention but they do not fix our hearts.

The only way to break the cycle is for God to speak a word of promise that would cause us to turn to him. That is what God does throughout this passage.

- In verse 6, God says, "I the LORD do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed." In other words, God has always shown mercy to his people and will continue to show mercy.
- In verse 7, God says, "Return to me, and I will return to you." This is an invitation. God is calling them back.

- In verse 10, God 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." This is one of the only times in Scripture where we are called to "test God," or prove Him. This is not a promise from which to shy away, or of which to be afraid. God promises to open the "windows of heaven" and "pour out" blessings. Just like God did in the wilderness when God "opened" the "doors of heaven" and "rained down manna" to sustain His people (Ps 78:23-24).

You see, God doesn't just say, "Don't worry," and then goes away, leaving us in our fears. God says, "I promise to be your God and give you everything good." And then God keeps his word, giving us not only daily bread, but the other things we need to live from day to day."

God doesn't just say, "Don't feel guilty." God says, "Here's what I've done about your guilt. I have heaped it all on Christ and he's carried it for you, drowning all your sins and guilt in my grace." Or God says, "Here's what I think of you, with all of your shame: I love you more than you could love or hate yourself. You are mine." God goes even further, in this meal, God promises to be with you. God is here reassuring us that he will never let us down.

Conclusion

Where do you turn when things are falling apart? God, says, "Return to me." Return to me in the confession and hear my absolution. Return to me by reading my Word. It is filled with promises for you. Return to me in prayer. There is no concern too big for me to hear. Return to me by coming forward and receiving Christ in the Lord's Supper. It is for you. Return to me!

**In Jesus Name,
Amen!**