

Questioning God's Fairness

A Study of Malachi 2:17-3:6

Characteristic of Completeness: Patience

Big Idea: Sometimes our cry for "Justice!" really means "Just us!"

Related Scriptures: Psalm 5:4; 13:1-6; Habakkuk 1:2-4, 13; Matthew 27:46 cf. Luke 23:46; Romans 3:10-12; 12:12; James 5:7-8; 2 Peter 3:9

Introduction:

- A. (Play video "Joy." It should come on automatically.)
- B. ► I would venture to say that every person in this room has, at one time or another, in one way or another, struggled with the fairness or justice of God. Sometimes things seem so blatantly wrong and unjust, we question God: "That is not fair! God, how could you let this happen?"
1. Some people are born into healthy, loving families. Others are born into dysfunctional, abusive ones.
 2. Some people can eat like a horse and not gain a pound. Others just nibble and put on weight.
 3. Some bad people seem to skip along comfortably through life. Some good people endure one tragedy after another.
 4. Some students have a popular combination of looks and personality. Others are ignored or even ostracized as outcasts.

All this unfairness is troubling, particularly when you're on the short end of it. Sometimes it can feel like God simply set you up to get creamed. And Jesus knows exactly what that feels like because, if you think about it, God the Father did, in fact, set His Son up to get creamed on a cross for no wrongdoing of His own. How fair is that?

- C. And there's a related paradox in the Bible that seems to add to the confusion. Sometimes when people complain to God about injustice, it seems to be okay with God. Other times, it's not. Sometimes God responds compassionately and sympathetically to the cry of His people. Other times, He just doesn't want to hear it.
1. There are plenty of examples of good complaints that seem to be perfectly acceptable—even welcomed by God.
 - a. For example, David is described as a man after God's own heart. He complained about injustice. And God inspired David to record his complaint for us in ► Psalm 13, where he cries out:

^{ESV} Psalm 13:1 How long, O LORD? Will you forget me forever? How long will you hide your face from me? 2 How long must I take counsel in my soul and have sorrow in my heart all the day? How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?

- b. Habakkuk was a prophet, a man of God. In Habakkuk ► 1:2-4, he cries out:

^{ESV} Habakkuk 1:2 O LORD, how long shall I cry for help, and you will not hear? Or cry to you “Violence!” and you will not save? ► 3 Why do you make me see iniquity, and why do you idly look at wrong? Destruction and violence are before me; strife and contention arise. 4 So the law is paralyzed, and justice never goes forth. For the wicked surround the righteous; so justice goes forth perverted.

- c. And we know that sometimes it must be okay to complain about injustice because Jesus Himself did. And He was sinless. Hanging on a cross in agony He ► cries out:

^{ESV} Matthew 27:46 . . . “My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?”

2. But in our study through the Old Testament book of Malachi, we come today to a text that describes the complaining of the Israelites. And God is sick and tired of it.

Our text is Malachi 2:17-3:6, and in ► the first verse of the text, it says this:

^{ESV} Malachi 2:17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, “How have we wearied him?” By saying, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.” Or by asking, “Where is the God of justice?”

Notice that the Israelites also appear to be complaining about injustice. But God is not happy about it; He is weary of their whining. Why? What is it that makes some other complaining about injustice welcome and this complaining wearisome?

- I. First, let’s try to put ourselves in the sandals of the Israelites to understand what they’re complaining about.

- A. Notice in Verse 17 that it appears to the Israelites as though justice has been turned on its head. It seems to them as though God unfairly favors those who do evil, and even delights in them. The God of justice is nowhere to be found.
- B. The Israelites felt this way because life was miserable for them, and they expected far better.¹ They had been liberated from exile in Babylon and allowed to return to their homeland, yet they were still subject to Persian rule.² They expected a Messiah to come and establish His kingdom, yet He had not arrived. They expected the Promised Land to become a paradise, yet their crops had failed due to pests and drought.³ And they were tired of going through the religious rituals prescribed by a God who didn't seem to care.⁴

And so, against the charge that their words had wearied the Lord, the Israelites ask, "How have we wearied him?" Perhaps they were incredulous, thinking it's really the other way around.

- C. Has life ever felt so unfair that you just don't want to go to church and sing the perky little songs and put on the smiley face and exchange the superficial small talk—all for a God you don't really like right then? That's how I imagine the Israelites feel. That's why they're complaining. Are they not justified in doing so?
- II. Well, let's try to look at the complaining from God's point of view to see how it wearies Him.
- A. The first thing that occurs to me is that the Israelites had gone a step beyond the questioning and imploring of David and Habakkuk and Jesus. The Israelites were not just imploring; they were impugning. They were accusing God of delighting in evil, saying "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them."

Jesus had complained of injustice, but he had not gone that far. A short time after His complaint, Jesus ► says:

^{ESV} Luke 23:46 . . . "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" . . .

Habakkuk had complained of injustice, but he had not gone that far. In ► Habakkuk 2:13, he questions but does not impugn:

¹ Pieter A. Verhoef, *The Books of Haggai and Malachi, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament*, eds. R.K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard, Jr. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1987), 284.

² Malachi 1:8.

³ Malachi 3:11.

⁴ Malachi 1:13.

^{ESV} Habakkuk 1:13 You [God] who are of purer eyes than to see evil and cannot look at wrong, why do you idly look at traitors and are silent when the wicked swallows up the man more righteous than he?

David had complained of injustice, but he had not gone that far. In fact, God inspired David to write something with which the Israelites were probably quite familiar. In ► Psalm 5:4, he writes:

^{ESV} Psalm 5:4 For you are not a God who delights in wickedness; evil may not dwell with you.

This Scripture, known to the Israelites, adds to their insult. Their insinuation is that, not only does God delight in evil, but He's also a deceiver because He had assured them before that He doesn't delight in wickedness.

I take from all this that, while it may be okay to offer complaints and questions to God, insults are another matter. Ascribing evil to God is wearisome to Him.

- B. Secondly, ► it appears as though the Israelites are hypocrites, calling for justice, when in fact, they aren't really interested in justice at all. The personal behavior of the Israelites described elsewhere in Malachi shows that they are not really interested in justice.
1. In Malachi 1:1-5, we learned that the Israelites were selfishly expecting more than they got, when in reality, they got far more than they deserved. They apparently aren't concerned about that injustice.
 2. In Malachi 1:6-2:9, we learned that the Israelite priests were despising the name of the Lord by offering their leftovers and not their best to God. They apparently aren't concerned about that injustice.
 3. In Malachi 2:10-16, we learned that some of the Israelite husbands were faithless toward their wives, divorcing them in favor of younger pagan women. They apparently aren't concerned about that injustice.
 4. And in Malachi 3:7-12, we learned that the Israelites were selfishly robbing God of the tithes and contributions He was due. They apparently aren't concerned about that injustice.
- C. And beyond all that, the Israelites appear once again to be so self-absorbed, so narcissistic that they are oblivious to the reality that they had brought all this on themselves by their own waywardness. Remember, according to the Mosaic Covenant, God promised to discipline the Israelites for their disobedience.

So their backhanded cry for justice wasn't really a cry for justice. It was more like a tantrum of a child who plays the "that's-not-fair" card, when fairness is not the real issue at all; it's just selfishness. Andy Stanley ► in his book, *How Good Is Good Enough* says this:

When people complain about something not being fair, it is almost always a smoke screen for the fact that they are not getting something they want. ► Most of us walk around pretending to be the fairness police when, in fact, we usually play the fairness card when we are the ones being treated "unfairly."

► Every parent knows this to be the case. When have you known a child to throw down the fairness gauntlet when he got more than his fair share of something?⁵

Of course there are exceptions. But the norm brings me to ► the big idea of my message: Sometimes our cry for "Justice!" really means "Just us!" Sometimes it's just a selfish ploy clothed in fairness to get what we want. Sometimes our complaining is just self-centered, self-absorbed, narcissistic whining. And this is the kind of complaining that wearies God.

If I were God, I'm afraid I'd be more than wearied with people like me. I'd be done. I'd be thinking about pulling the plug on this whole humanity experiment. But He doesn't.

III. In the rest of our text, the Lord says, in effect, "You question my justice? Let me tell you about justice." God tells the Israelites how justice will unfold in the future.

A. In ► Malachi 3:1, He says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:1 "Behold, I send my messenger and he will prepare the way before me. . . ."

This is an allusion to John the Baptist who would prepare the way for Messiah. We know this because, in talking about John the Baptist in ► Matthew 11:10, Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1, saying,

^{ESV} Matthew 11:10 "This is he [John the Baptist] of whom it is written, 'Behold, I send my messenger before your face, who will prepare your way before you.'"

B. Malachi ► 3:1 continues, saying,

⁵ Andy Stanley, *How Good Is Good Enough?* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah Publishers, 2003), 80-81.

^{ESV} Malachi 3:1 “. . . And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”

I believe this is an allusion to the first coming of Christ, the Messiah.⁶ From our perspective, it occurred about two thousand years ago. From their perspective, it would not occur for a few hundred years.

- C. Then, I believe Verses 2-5 speak of the second coming of Christ, the one yet future for all of us, when He will judge the world.⁷ It ► says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:2 “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fullers’ soap. ► 3 He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD. ► 4 Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the LORD as in the days of old and as in former years. ► 5 Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts.”

- D. Then our text concludes in ► Verse 6, when God says,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:6 “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.”

God hasn’t changed a bit; He is still a gracious and merciful keeper of His promises. And that’s the only reason He doesn’t consume the Israelites. If they really got total fairness from God, they would be consumed.

In ► Verse 2, the question is asked,

^{ESV} Malachi 3:2 “But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?”

The unspoken but unmistakable answer is: No one. Apart from God’s grace, no one can stand justified before God. Romans ► 3:10-12 says,

^{ESV} Romans 3:10 . . . “None is righteous, no, not one; 11 no one understands; no one seeks for God. 12 All have turned aside; together they have become worthless; no one does good, not even one.”

⁶ John F. Walvoord, *The Prophecy Knowledge Handbook*, (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1990), 336.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 337.

And so, here's the great irony. Sometimes when we cry for justice, that's the last thing we really need. Do we really want God to be totally fair? Do we really want from God only what we deserve and nothing more? I don't think we want to go there. We need grace.

- IV. It ► seems to me that, in His response to the Israelites, God, by His grace, is both modeling patience and calling for it. Indeed, that is our ► Characteristic of Completeness for the week: Patience.

It appears that the Israelites' cry for "Justice!" really means "Just us!" God's response is honest and direct, but also reflects remarkable patience and grace. In effect He says, "Your words are wearisome to Me, but I have not changed. By My grace, you are not consumed. I still care about justice. Judgment is surely coming in which no one will be able to stand apart from My grace. I will surely overcome evil. So trust Me. Learn from your hardship. Own up to your selfish, sinful part in it. Obey Me. And be patient."

A similar idea is reflected in ► 2 Peter 3:9, where it says,

^{ESV} 2 Peter 3:9 The Lord is not slow to fulfill his promise as some count slowness, but is patient toward you, not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.

Romans ► 12:12 says,

^{ESV} Romans 12:12 Rejoice in hope, be patient in tribulation, be constant in prayer.

James ► 5:7-8 says,

^{ESV} James 5:7 Be patient, therefore, brothers, until the coming of the Lord. See how the farmer waits for the precious fruit of the earth, being patient about it, until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also, be patient. Establish your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is at hand.

- V. Are ► you somehow crying out for justice these days? Are you secretly miffed that you seem to have gotten the short end of the stick? Stuck with this job. Or stuck in this marriage. Or stuck being single. Or stuck with these looks. Or stuck with this debt. Or stuck with these kids. Or stuck with this ailment. And the seeming injustice of it all has you thinking, "It's not fair!"

Sometimes our cry for "Justice!" really means "Just us!" Take a lesson from Malachi. Search your heart to see if selfishness lurks behind your cry. If so, own it. And repent. Recognize that the last thing you need is for God to be fair with you. You need God's grace. And He's already extended grace to you in the Person of Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

► ^{ESV} Malachi 3:6 "For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed."