

Henry Ow
 HCC Sermon
 Malachi 2:17-3:5

INTRODUCTION

1. Image: The poor can't afford to have bad luck.
2. Need: The presence of injustice makes us spiritually apathetic.
3. Subject: How do we avoid spiritual apathy when injustice occurs? [Injustice reveals that we need God more not less]
4. Text: Malachi 2:17-3:5
5. Preview: What does injustice tempt us to think about God? What does injustice make us anticipate from God? What does injustice prompt God to do?

BODY

- I. Injustice tempts us to think that God does not care about justice (2:17)
 - A. Israel believed that the injustice in their community meant that God no longer cared for them (2:17)
 1. Israel believed that God supported evil (2:17b)
 2. Israel doubted care for them (2:17c)
 - B. We may believe that God doesn't care when injustice occurs.
 1. When we face mistreatment, we wonder: "Where is God?"
 2. When we hear of injustice, we wonder: "Where is God?"
 - C. Avoid the temptation that God doesn't care by remember how you unjustly treated him.
 1. Israel had treated God with half-hearted devotion.
 2. We treat God with half-hearted devotion occasionally.
- II. Injustice makes us anticipate God's coming to bring about justice (3:1-2a)
 - A. Malachi predicts the coming of the Lord to bring about justice (3:1-2a).
 1. A messenger will prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord (3:1a)
 2. The Lord will come into his temple (3:1b)
 3. No one will be able to resist the Lord (3:2a)
 - B. Only God can bring about true justice
 1. God knows the motive.
 2. God knows the act.
 3. God knows the appropriate response.
 - C. Anticipate the coming of the Lord.
 1. The messenger has already come.
 2. The Lord has already come.
 3. The judgment of God is pending.
- III. Injustice prompts God to purify his people or judge his people (3:2b-5)
 - A. Malachi predicts that the coming of the Lord will bring about purification or destruction.
 1. Malachi predicts that the Lord will purify the Levites (3:2b-4)
 2. Malachi predicts that the Lord will destroy the evildoers (3:5)

- B. Unbelievers have an opportunity to experience purification through faith in Christ.
- C. We must entrust justice to God.
- D. Trust God to deal with your acts of injustice and the injustice of the world.

Conclusion

1. Summary: Injustice tempts us to that God doesn't care about justice. Injustice makes us anticipate God's coming to bring about justice. Injustice prompts God to purify or judge. [Injustice reveals our that we need God more not less]
2. Closing Image: John Stott on how the cross speaks to injustice and suffering.

MANUSCRIPT

The poor cannot afford to have bad luck. Gary Haugen, a believer, and president of International Justice Mission has seen global poverty up close for the last two decades. Hear his description of what it means to be poor: I recall the way an old history professor of mine defined poverty: He said the poor are the ones who can never afford to have any bad luck. They can't get an infection because they don't have access to any medicine. They can't get sick or miss their bus or get injured because they will lose their menial labor job if they don't show up for work. They can't misplace their pocket change because it's the only money they have left for food. They can't have their goats get sick because it's the only source of milk they have. On and on it goes. Of course the bad news is, everybody has bad luck. It's just that most of us have margins of resources and access to support that allow us to weather the storm, because we're not trying to live off \$2.00 a day.

When some of us hear Gary Gaugen's description of poverty, we may think: This is unfair. Some might even say: This is unjust. Why should hard working people have to live through life in this way? We don't need to think very long before we can think of other instances of injustices. During this past year, we have read or heard news of senseless shootings where innocent people died because of someone's violent behavior. We've also read and heard of instances of racism in our country: violence against African Americans or violence against Asian Americans. We see around us as we drive through our city the economic disparities in our communities. Families go to sleep hungry not in countries far away, but even in our own city. If we think about it too much, then it could be discouraging.

The presence of injustice may make us spiritually apathetic. As we think of the woes of our community we may wonder: Where is God? Why doesn't God do something? Why doesn't he change things so that another innocent person doesn't have to die? Another family doesn't need to go hungry. Why can't bad guys be put behind bars and innocent people go free? Why do women have to raise children when the father leaves? These instances erode our confidence in God. Our appetite for spiritual truth diminishes because how can we follow a God who seems to allow these unjust acts to occur?

But for some of us, injustice prompts us to act. It leads us to join organizations to fight human trafficking. We join groups that advocate for socially depressed communities. We decide to teach in areas where most teachers avoid. We do this to try and make a difference. Yet over time our efforts seem to yield very little results. We began with great spiritual fervor. But that fervor over time diminishes and may eventually lead to spiritual apathy as well.

How do we avoid spiritual apathy when injustice occurs? How do we maintain a faith in God when the injustices around us make us feel helpless? We avoid spiritual apathy when **we realize that we need God more not less when injustices occur**. We need to press into God more not less when we hear about another senseless shooting. We need to ask God for help when we hear about another instance of racism.

The nation of Israel needed to learn this lesson. They needed to learn to press into God more when injustices occur. When the nation of Israel returned to the promised land, the neighboring nations mistreated them. Slander caused them to pause construction on the temple. Nehemiah faced opposition in rebuilding the wall. If it wasn't enough that foreigners mistreated them, then you had those within the Jewish community exploiting their fellow Jews.

This regular experience of injustice caused Israel to experience spiritual apathy. They began to complain. Malachi hearing their complaint preaches to them God's reply. This complaint and reply will be the focus of our message this morning. It is found in **Malachi, chapter two, verse seventeen**. Please turn there if you're not there already. Malachi, chapter two, verse seventeen.

In this morning's text, we'll answer three questions. First, what does injustice tempt us to think about God? Second, what does injustice make us anticipate from God? Third, what does injustice prompt God to do?

First question: what does injustice tempt us to think about God? **Injustice tempts us to think that God does not care about justice**. After all, if God cared about justice, then God would have done something. If God is just, then wouldn't he ensure that justice would be done? **Injustice tempts us to think that God does not care about justice**.

Israel believed that the injustice in their community meant that God no longer cared for them. This prompts Israel to conclude: God must now think that evil is good. **Israel believed that God supported evil**. After all, he didn't do anything to stop it. Malachi writes this in verse 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."* Within the Jewish community, some had adopted the practice of worshipping other gods (2:11). God did nothing to stop them. Some no longer honored the marriage covenant as Moses instructed. God did nothing. The lack of divine intervention prompted Israel to believe that God blessed such activities.

Israel doubted God's care for them. They believed that if Israel obeyed God by worshipping him as outlined in the Mosaic law, then blessing would come. God would establish a Davidic king. This Davidic king would then overthrow their Persian overlords and Israel would rise again to prominence. Instead, the post-exilic Jewish community had to pay tribute to their Persian rulers. They had to fend off neighboring enemies. If God really cared for Israel, then he would do something. Malachi writes this in the latter half of verse seventeen: *"Or by asking: 'where is the God of Justice?'"* Since God had left them, then Israel saw no reason to worship God as he instructed or abide by his instructions. Everyone looked out for their own interests. If they didn't, then God certainly wouldn't.

Sometimes, we find ourselves echoing this Israelite community. **We may believe that God doesn't care when injustices occur. When we face mistreatment, we wonder: "Where is God?"** As the traffic light turns green on main street, you make a right turn onto Holcombe. Suddenly, you feel a jolt. Your car spins out of control. The airbags deploy. As you recover from the daze, you see the perpetrator speed off in another direction. Your first thought is "Where is the police when you need them?" The second thought is "Where is God? Why didn't he catch the guy?" You had the right of way. Why did this happen? It's unfair. It's unjust.

When we hear of injustice, we wonder: "Where is God?" We listen to a news reporter ask a resident in an economically depressed area of the country: "Since CVS has a stockpile of COVID vaccines, do you plan on getting vaccinated?" The resident responds: "Do you see a CVS in this community? I wouldn't even know how to get to a CVS to receive a vaccine." Where is God? It's unjust. It's unfair.

It's easy to think that God doesn't care about justice when we see so many injustices around. What do we do to avoid thinking and believing that God doesn't care? **Remember how you unjustly treated him.**

Israel had treated God with half-hearted devotion. Earlier in verse 17 Malachi describes God's response to Israel's complaints: "*You have wearied the LORD with your words.*" Israel tires God out when it complains. It's like a child complaining to a parent: "You always take her side" even though he instigated the fight with his sister. It's wearisome.

It's as though God is saying: "You're going to complain to me about justice. You haven't treated me with whole-hearted devotion. You offer lame animals for sacrifice. Your priests fail to instruct the people in my ways. You do not value marriage. You don't worship me exclusively. Now you expect me to help you? You expect me to bless you? Don't you remember that part of the covenant is for you to be whole-heartedly devoted to me? I'm tired of this"

We treat God with half-hearted devotion occasionally too. We think that because we pray every day, attend small group, participate in Sunday morning worship we should not receive mistreatment. Why am I passed up for promotion? Why does the student I tutor get into the medical school I want? Why does that person get the residency program that I want? Why does my sibling receive favor from my parents?

But if we're honest, do we mumble our prayers so that we can to our day's tasks? Do we attend small group, but our mind wanders often to the basketball game that's happening concurrently? Do we participate in Sunday morning worship but check our emails? Yes... I see you. Do you think that God doesn't see your half-hearted devotion to him? You're treating him

as a vendor. If I do this thing, then you God you'll have to do this for me. That's not how God works.

Now some of you may think, but I'm entirely invested in following God. I'm sold out for Christ. I pray with fervor. I participate in small group. When my small group leader asks for help with something, I always volunteer to help. When I'm at worship service, I have a laser-like focus. Yet mistreatment still happens. Injustice still occurs.

I think it all comes down to expectations. What do we do anticipate God to do when injustice occurs? This is our second question for today's message. What does injustice make us anticipate from God?

Injustice makes us anticipate God's coming to bring about justice. When we experience injustice, it creates in us a desire for God to come to make things right. When we hear of injustice, we look forward to God making things right. **Injustice makes us anticipate God's coming to bring about justice.**

Malachi predicts the coming of the Lord to bring about justice. Here what he says in chapter three, verse one: *"Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. 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. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears?"*

From these verses, we can see three things about the coming of the Lord. First, **a messenger will prepare Israel for the coming of the Lord.** In Ancient Near East customs, a messenger will go before the king to prepare a city for his coming. The messenger will make sure that the proper accommodations will be made. The messenger prepares the people on

what to say and what to do if they cross paths with the king. In the case of Israel, the messenger will prepare the hearts of Israel to receive the Lord. Malachi writes in verse one: *“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me.”*

Second, **the Lord will come into his temple**. Why is this mentioned? If you recall, when Moses completed the construction of the tabernacle the spirit of God entered via the form of a cloud. Hundreds of years later, Solomon completes construction of the temple in Jerusalem. Again, the Spirit of God enters the temple via a cloud. Due to Israel’s disobedience, the Babylonians destroy the temple and take Judah into exile. When the remnant returns, they rebuild the temple under the direction of Zerubbabel and Joshua the high priest. But when the construction of the temple is complete, the Spirit of God does not enter the temple. What is going on? This is what the people of Israel wait for. When will God return to the temple to render justice and return Israel to glory. Malachi predicts that the return of the Lord will happen soon. When it occurs, the Lord returns no one expects it. One might say that the Lord surprises Israel when he arrives. Look with me at chapter three, verse 1: *“And the Lord whom you see will suddenly come to his temple”*.

Let’s talk about the third observation. **No one will be able to resist the Lord**. Malachi writes this in the first half of verse two: *“But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when appears?”* Note the verbs: endure and stand. Biblical authors use these terms to describe how no army can overcome the power and judgment of the Lord. Unlike other contexts, where it refers to no enemy of Israel being able to stand against the Lord. The Lord says that his own people will not be able to resist his judgment.

Why is important that we anticipate God's coming? **Only God can bring about true justice.** Only he can render a full and complete judgment.

Why? After all, don't we have a judicial system? Don't we have judges, prosecutors, defense attorneys, and juries? Why can only God administer true justice.

While we do have a judicial system, it doesn't always work perfectly. For instance, not all witnesses will tell the truth during a trial. The jurors while attempting to remain neutral have natural biases. A prosecutor may persuade the jury to accept the idea that the evidence points to the conviction of the accused, but there are flaws in their argument. A defense attorney defending their client, may help a guilty person go free. A judge may render a sentence, but sometimes the sentence may be too harsh or too light. Now I'm not saying that we should do away with our judicial system. I'm just saying that while it's provides some measure of justice, it's not perfect.

Well how can God bring about true justice? **God knows the motive.** He knows our thoughts and our hearts. He knows when a person may run a red light because he needs to get his pregnant wife to a hospital. He knows when a person runs a red light because they're intoxicated. He knows when a person steals bread to feed his starving family versus the person who embezzles millions of dollars because of greed.

God knows the act. He is present everywhere. There is no crime or injustice that he does not see. God knows the innocence and guilt of the accused. He knows exactly how the unjust act goes down. He doesn't need to play Sherlock Holmes.

God knows the appropriate response. He also knows each person so well that he knows the appropriate punishment for the crime. For each person responds to punishments

differently. Some people respond better to a fine. Others respond better to time in prison. The punishment will match the crime.

Some of the things that Malachi predicted has already happened. Why do we still need to anticipate the coming of the Lord? Why do we still need to wait for God to administer justice.

Let's see which aspects of chapter three, verse ones and two have been fulfilled. First, **the messenger has already come**. In the New Testament, the gospel authors and Jesus state that the messenger is John the Baptist. John the Baptist himself describe his ministry as bringing the people of Israel to repentance by baptizing them. When John the Baptist baptizes people in the Jordan, the religious leaders stand on the banks watching. The religious leaders failed to understand they needed to prepare themselves for the coming of the Lord.

There's a second prediction that has been fulfilled. **The Lord has already come**. Instead of the Lord coming to the temple in the form of a spirit, he comes in a human body. God incarnate, the Son, enters the temple. When he arrives on the temple, no one greets him (Mark 11:11). It fulfills the prediction of Malachi: *"And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple."* When you read the verse, it sounds like Israel looks forward to the coming of God. But the phrase: "whom you seek" is a sarcastic statement. To highlight this flavor, it could be rendered: "whom you claim to seek". And when Jesus arrives in the temple, no one seeks him out.

There's a third prediction of judgment. Where's the judgment? If Jesus came to bring judgement, then there would only be one person who would survive: Jesus. He is the only righteous human being who ever lived. He alone pleased God. If Jesus brought judgment to Israel and the earth, then every single person would be condemned to destruction because of

sin. Instead of bringing judgment suddenly, Jesus goes to the cross to take on the judgment of sin. He pays the penalty for our sin. Whoever believes in the saving work of Jesus Christ will be saved from judgment. This fulfills the prediction of Malachi in the latter half of verse one: *“and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts.”* This messenger of the covenant refers to Jesus. Jesus replaces the old covenant with a new covenant based upon his saving work on the cross.

The judgment of God is pending. Before Jesus ascends into heaven, he gives his followers a commission to share the news of the new covenant to the world. In a way, Jesus sends us out as a messenger like John the Baptist to prepare people for coming of the Lord. When Jesus returns a second time, he will bring judgment to the wicked. Those found on that day who have not placed their faith in Christ will experience God’s wrath.

Let’s move to the last question: “What does injustice prompt God to do?” What does God do as we live in a world where injustice occurs?

Injustice prompts God to purify his people or judge evildoers. God will bring either cleansing or judgment. He will refine the character of his people. God will bring condemnation on those who are not. **Injustice prompts God to purify his people or judge evildoers.**

Malachi predicts that the coming of the Lord will bring about purification or destruction. First, **Malachi predicts that the Lord will purify the Levites.** Look with me at the latter half of verse 2: *“For he is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap. He will set as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levin and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the Lord.”* There are two images used: refining a precious metal and washing laundry. A refiner would remove impurities from metal through

heating it in a crucible and cupping out the dross. A person washing clothes would use an alkaline substance like baking soda to whiten their clothes. Both images convey the idea of cleansing and purification. This work we now know is done through the Holy Spirit.

Malachi predicts that the Levites will receive this type of purification. But what happens to the other tribes? Some believe that the reason why God purifies the Levites is that they are the spiritual leaders of Israel. During the time of Malachi, the Levites have not been shepherding God's people well. Exhibit A: The blemished sacrifices. Exhibit B: The heretical teaching of the priests. Malachi predicts a top-down approach.

But the Levites have not received the purification of God during the ministry of Christ. So... are we still waiting? Yes and no. If you recall, there are thirteen tribes of Israel. But God takes the Levites to be his own tribe to serve him in the temple. Therefore, twelve tribes are often mentioned instead. I think that the Levites might be a type referring to God's own. And John in his gospel describes believers as children of God. Peter also describes believers as priests (1 Peter 2:9). In some sense, this prediction has been fulfilled because the Holy Spirit does a purifying work in believers. But it may be fulfilled in the future, where God will bring about this purification of the Levites in Israel at a future time.

God will purify. But God will also judge. **Malachi predicts that the Lord will destroy the evildoers.** Look with me at verse five: *"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."*

God will serve as judge, witness, prosecutor, and jury against these evildoers. The primary descriptor of these evildoers is that they do not fear God. They don't think that God is watching as they attempt to manipulate the spiritual forces for their advantages through sorcery. But God is watching. When someone goes to meet with their mistress, they believe that no one knows. But God knows. When someone utters a lie even though they had sworn an oath to tell a truth, they think no one will know. But God knows. When an employer underpays an employee for their tasks, the employee will never audit the books. But God knows every excel spreadsheet cell. Some may think that they can take advantage of the widow, the orphan, and the refugee. But God knows their treachery. If God knows all these evil deeds, then how can we possibly escape his judgment?

For those of you who have not believed in Christ, judgment awaits you. While we may complain about the injustices around us, we have committed a grave injustice toward God by rejecting his rule. Yet God demonstrates his mercy for providing a way to escape through his faith in Jesus Christ. **You have an opportunity to experience purification through faith in Christ.**

For believers, **we must entrust justice to God.** Yes, we must be responsible to pursue justice the best we can when we see an opportunity. But we shouldn't feel discouraged when our efforts produce few results. We know that God will ultimately bring about justice on this earth at the return of Christ.

When it comes to injustice, what should we do? **Trust God to deal with our acts of injustice and the injustice of the world.**

Let's review what we discussed this morning. Injustice tempts us to think that God does not care about justice. Injustice makes us anticipate God's coming to bring about justice. Injustice prompts God to purify his people and judge the evildoer.

John Stott shared an imaginary story of how the Cross speaks to injustice and suffering. An imaginary poor man from the slums of Brazil climbs 2,310 feet up the mountain to the colossal statue of Christ that towers about Rio de Janeiro. After the difficult climb, the poor man finally reaches Jesus and says, I have climbed up to meet you Christ, from the filthy, confined quarters down there... to put before you, most respectfully, these considerations: there are 900,000 of us down there in the slums of that splendid city... And you... do you remain here at Corcovado surrounded by divine glory? Go down there to the favelas... Don't stay away from us; live among us and give us new faith in you and in the Father. Amen. Stott asks, "What would Christ say in response to such an entreaty?" Would he not say "[in the suffering of the cross] I did come down to live among you, and I live among you still"? Then Stott adds, "We have to learn to climb the hill called Calvary, and from that vantage-ground survey all life's tragedies. The cross does not solve the problem of suffering, but it supplies the essential perspective from which to look at it... Sometimes, we picture [God] lounging, perhaps dozing, in some celestial deckchair, while the hungry millions starve to death.... It is this terrible caricature of God which the cross smashes to smithereens. Injustice reveals that we need God more not less.