

Robbing God

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[0 : 0 0] in verses 6 through 18. In verse 13 we have translated for us in the NIV the words, you have spoken arrogantly against me, says the Lord, or literally, you have said harsh things against me, says the Lord. You have said harsh things against me. When people learn that I have a PhD, many of them think that makes me smart. Actually you all know the opposite is the truth.

The more you know, the more you know how little you know. The more you learn, the more you learn how little you have actually learned. I've been a Christian for over 30 years and perhaps that makes other people think that I know a lot about God. Actually the opposite is also true. The more you know about God, the more you know how little you know about God. And the more you learn about the gospel, the more you learn how little you have learned. This, if correctly understood, should lead to humility before God and reverence for God. But the truth is whether we've been Christians for 30 minutes or 30 years, we know, understand and experience God and his gospel so little that although we may not say harsh things about God to each other, we still think them.

We think them to ourselves. Perhaps we resent the sacrifices that we've made as Christians and we don't understand how bad people succeed while good people suffer. Perhaps we blame God for the inequality and we say harsh things about him to ourselves. How can a good God let these bad people succeed? I thought life would be easier as a Christian for me than this.

The God who knows us better than we know ourselves and loves us more than we know says to us, look, you've said harsh things against me and I know you have.

Is there anybody here saying harsh things about God this evening? You don't have to say them out loud, but just say them to yourselves. I don't pass judgment on anyone for this because I've been there often enough myself. But what I would say is that this is a sign not of God's goodness, but of our lack of knowledge of him. For all the years we've been Christians, you know we know so little of his power at work for us, his purposes for us, and his passion for us.

[2 : 5 5] We've seen the demonstration of the love of God for us in this. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. And yet still are there not times we say harsh things about him?

If that's true for us, it was even more true for the priests of Malachi's day. They're complaining against God, complaining that it costs them too much to be his people, and complaining that following God is pointless and futile when those who don't follow him seem to succeed in everything they do. Malachi 3 verses 6 through 18 record God's response to the harsh things the priests and people of Israel were thinking and saying against him. The harsh things they say really is a sign of how little they understand God, and of how spiritually immature they are before him. This passage teaches us two things about God which answer the harsh accusations of the Israelites in Malachi's day, and we today also. First, the Lord gives more than he takes in verses 6 through 12. And secondly, the Lord knows more than he shows in verses 13 to 18.

God's gospel responses to our legal objections should, if correctly understood, lead to humility before God and reverence for God. First of all then, the Lord gives more than he takes, verses 6 through 12.

The Lord gives more than he takes. We're all familiar with the idea that although in one sense it costs nothing to be a Christian because on the cross Jesus paid the price for our salvation. In another sense it costs everything. Jesus says to us, deny yourself, take up your cross, follow me. To deny ourselves means to consciously make him Lord of our lives. As Christians, the apostle Paul says, we're no longer our own.

We're his because we were bought with a price. Our money is no longer ours. It belongs to Christ. Our time is no longer ours. It belongs to Christ. Our relationships are no longer ours. They belong to Christ. Along with the Christian hymn writer Robin Mark. We joyfully sing Jesus. All for Jesus. All I am and have and ever hope to be. All my ambitions, hopes and plans, I surrender these into your hands. We do.

[5 : 48] When I was a young Christian, whether it was right or wrong, there was a list of things I knew that I could not do. Regrettably this list was composed mainly of outward behaviours, a list which taught me and my peers how to be good hypocrites. But it also taught me that there are certain things to which as a Christian, I had to say no. It is a consistent teaching of the Bible that as followers of Jesus, there are certain things to which we must say no. Again, the apostle Paul tells us that the grace of Christ has appeared which teaches us to say no to ungodliness and worldly passions. And so as Christians there are certain lifestyles and relationships and actions to which we must say no.

I rather think the most important things to say no to are internal attitudes, passions and resentments. Nevertheless, the point holds good. As Christians we are deceived if we think that we can say or do anything we like. And that means there are times when being a Christian is hard, especially for young people because it's difficult for young people to say no to many of the things their classmates and friends want to do with them. And so perhaps we're tempted to say to ourselves, why is God so demanding?

Why do I have to give up all these things and say no to them? The price of being a Christian is too high for me to pay. I don't want to say all for Jesus. We see this with frightening regularity in our experience even in this church. A young Christian man seems to be thriving in the faith, but then he meets a girl and he falls in love. She's not a Christian and far from being sympathetic to his faith, she makes him subconsciously choose between her and Jesus. He chooses her because he reckons the cost of abandoning her. He says of himself, what God is asking of me is too high a price to pay.

And he finds it easier to say no to God than to her or to himself. And so he abandons God and chooses her. That's a little bit like the priests and people of Malachi's day for whom they thought that offering God a tithe was too high a price to pay. They thought that, well, 10% of my harvest given to God, that's too high a price to pay. What God is asking me to give him, 10% of my possessions, that's way too high a price to pay. I can think of many other ways I could use that 10%, that tithe, rather than giving it to God. I could enjoy a better lifestyle. I could go on a fancier holiday. I could buy a bigger house.

I could buy younger cattle. I could buy more fields. They find it easier, you see, to say no to God than to themselves or to their possessions. And in this case, the harsh things they're saying against God is this. God takes what he doesn't give. God's asking me to give him more than he's given me.

[9 : 44] God's demands are unreasonable in my life and the price is too high for me to pay. These are the harsh things. Is this fair? Is self-denial and cross-bating too high a price for us?

If you listen to the health and wealth prosperity preachers, they'll tell you that God wants you to be healthy and wealthy. So what's all this talk of suffering and self-denial and saying no to the things that will make us happy? Is God really asking us to give him more than he's given us?

Are his demands to pursue holiness and Christ-likeness unreasonable? And the price of following Jesus too high?

Consider with me the text itself. In verse 6, God draws the people's attention to who he is, the Lord. You will know that the Lord in small capital letters refers to the covenant name of God, the name Yahweh or Jehovah. He draws their attention to who they are, the descendants of Jacob. They are the Israelites. They are the people of God's peculiar love whose existence as a people is entirely a function of his gracious promise to Abraham. This is who God is.

This is who they are. The God who's infinitely committed to them in love and has made them into a people. They owe their history to this God. They owe their land to this God. To his loving determination to give them a land of their very own and to bless them and make them as numerous as the stars in the sky. His loving determination which led to his rescuing them from Egypt and then from Babylon.

[11 : 44] This is who he is. This is who they are. Consider also verse 11. God draws the people's attention to the state of their land. I'm reading between the lines here but it would seem from what God says in verse 11 that their harvests have been poor. The land has not been as productive as it should have been.

There have been plagues of locusts and various plant diseases which have led to a tremendous decrease in productivity. Israel's vines aren't producing the grapes they used to. The land has become difficult to work. Their present condition is a function of their falling away from him of how according to verse 7 they have turned aside from God's statutes and have not kept him. If the Israelites had spiritualized to see they'd realize that on account of their disobedience their land was now under the covenant curse of God. If they had spiritualized to see and a spiritual mind to respond they'd realize that their greatest need wasn't to find new technologies to make the land more productive and that's the way they should invest their tithes but to return to the Lord.

Note also not just God's past dealings with Israel and God's present call to them to turn back to him but God's promise in verses 10 through 12 he tells them that if they will turn back to him if they will test him in this if they will pay the price of obedience he'll open the sluice gates of heaven and he will pour out so much blessing upon them that they will not have room enough for it all. Their land will blossom their fruit will grow and the nations around them will call them blessed for they shall be a land of delight. Torrents of blessing will rage from the heavens if his people will but turn to him and trust him in this. Not the measly harvests they're now experiencing but harvest so great there won't be room to contain them all. So here in this passage we have a God who is as lovingly committed who's lovingly committed to them and his past gracious dealings with the people of Israel.

We have God who through his word and through the circumstances of their nation calls his people to return to him. We have a God who promises an overwhelming flood of blessing if his people should walk in his ways. So the question we ask is this is the tithe really too high a price to pay?

Is obedience to such a loving God who has rescued them from slavery and who promises to bless them richly? Is that really so demanding? Is God really taking where he doesn't give? Is God asking the Israelites to give him more than he's given them? Are the demands of God unreasonable and the price of God too high? Now of course we live on the other side of the cross from the priests and people of Malachi's day.

[14 : 58] We live in days of gospel grace and the blood of Christ sacrificed for us. We've seen Jesus on the cross and rising from the dead. We've heard him call out for our forgiveness and proclaim it is finished.

We've had the significance of his death explained to us in the epistles that the son of God loved us and gave himself for us. That the Lord God of Malachi's day became the sacrifice for our sins.

That God gave the very best thing he had to save us. He gave us himself. He gave us his son bruised and bloodied on the cross.

He gave us his very heart. He gave us the gospel that it's not by works we are saved but by simple faith in a gracious savior.

What is God asking you to say no to this evening? Is it an unhelpful relationship? Is it a damaging way of thinking?

[16 : 07] Is it a worldly attitude toward possessions? What is God asking you to do this evening? In what ways is he calling you to be more like Jesus in your self-denial and cross-bearing?

That which he has done for us is so much greater than that which he did for the Israelites of Malachi's day.

That which he tells us in his word and through the circumstances of our lives is spoken so much louder than that of Malachi's day.

The promises he makes us are so much greater than those he gave to the people of Malachi's day. So can any of us honestly this evening in the light of God's superabounding mercy and grace ever say the harsh things we so often say to ourselves about God?

God's taking from me more than he's given me. God's asking me to give him more than he's given me.

[17 : 23] God's demands are unreasonable. The price of following Jesus is too high. Let us make no mistake from the Bible and from our own experience we have learned we can never out give God.

That he will always give us far more than he takes from us. The harsh things that we say about him to ourselves are not fair. And show us how little we really know him.

But God says to us his word of grace this evening test me in this. A test which I want to challenge us all to accept myself included. But especially for the younger among us.

Kids are you listening carefully to what I'm saying? You will never give to God more than he's given gives and will give you.

You will never be the loser for saying no to certain things and yes to others. You will never be the loser for singing with your heart and your voice along with that hymn writer Robin Mark Jesus all for Jesus all I am and have and ever hope to be all my ambitions hopes and plans I surrender these into your hands.

[18 : 51] The Lord gives more than he takes. But then secondly and briefly in verses 13 through 18 the Lord knows more than he shows. The Lord knows more than he shows.

Well of course we go back here again the more you know God the more you know how little you know God. The more you learn about God the more you learn how much more there is to learn about God.

One of the reasons why there are times when we might say harsh things about God to ourselves is that we we know so little about him and have learned so little about him.

And one of the common ways in which we speak harshly about God is in the area of fairness or justice. For the Israelites of Malachi's day and for us also we can't stand the way in which wicked people prosper.

In which the proud of this world seem to succeed in all they do. Those who care nothing for God seem to get away with blue murder.

[20 : 01] I mean why are there so many people in our society who think that God is a myth but they live in mansions they've got loads of money and they live to a good old age while so many of God's people suffer hardship live in poverty and die young.

They didn't ever bother repenting of sin or straining after holiness. They couldn't care less about Jesus and his love and yet they seem to all intents and purposes to have been blessed in life with all these things and not cursed.

By contrast God's people give themselves a hard time about their sin and deny themselves so many things in their pursuit of holiness and Christ likeness. That thing they call grace.

It cost them so many of these world's pleasures and sometimes we think what's the point? Again that's the way the priests and people of Israel were thinking in Malachi's day.

In the light of the prosperity of the wicked and the poverty of the righteous they say harsh things about God. Verse 14 they say it is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the Lord Almighty?

[21 : 25] It's rather like us saying to God God that's not fair. And let's be honest there are times when we speak harshly to ourselves about him in these terms.

Something goes wrong in our lives. Mental illness strikes or we lose a loved one and we accusingly say to God God that's not fair.

Why should that happen to me when all I'm trying to do is to follow you? Why do I end up depressed when people who don't give you a second thought are laughing like clowns?

God that's not fair. it's almost like you don't know whose side you're on God the side of the wicked or the righteous.

It's almost like we want to take God by the shoulders force him to see the painful situations in which we find ourselves in and ask him what's the point of being a Christian if this is how painful it is?

[22 : 41] If we're being honest with ourselves we've all had thoughts like this Psalm 73 type objections shall we say. We want God to show himself to be fair and righteous to us in the here and now to give the wicked what they deserve and to give us what we deserve.

Well how does God respond? From verse 16 he recognizes that even those who fear him and honor him ask these kind of questions. That as they talk together they're saying to one another why do the wicked prosper?

Why do those who take no notice of God increase in wealth? Why do they seem so carefree? Does God not see? Does he not know?

This isn't fair. They're pursuing obedience and holiness repenting of sin and following God. They fear him and they honor his name but they ask these questions.

God knows what we say about him and to ourselves and yes even to other Christians. He knows the doubts and the accusations. Nothing's hidden from him.

[23 : 53] But whereas we may accuse him he does not accuse us. Rather he lovingly records our questions and frustrations in what Malachi calls a scroll of remembrance.

the God who loves us isn't interested in throwing our accusations back in our faces but in answering every one of them. He's got them all written down.

He'll never forget one of them. He will never allow our questions to go ultimately unresolved. Rather even though we accuse him at this time of not being fair he assures us I know far more than I'm showing.

He points us in verse 17 to a day which lies in the future. The day when those who fear and honour him now even though they don't understand what he's doing shall be his treasured possession.

In the thought world of the Old Testament this word treasured possession the Hebrew word is incredibly important. It refers to God's covenant commitment to his people.

[25 : 10] He's their Lord and he loves them and he takes pleasure in them and they're his delight his precious possession. On that day God's treasured possession those he has like a father had compassion upon and spared they'll be shown the distinction between the righteous and the wicked.

between those who serve God and those who do not. What is at present hidden from those who fear God and honour his name will on that day be revealed to them.

What God knows now the distinction between the righteous and the wicked who are his and who are not he will show on that day he will divide the human race into the sheep and the goats those who served him and those who did not.

On that day the day we long for now the righteous shall be vindicated and the wicked shall be condemned there shall be ultimate fairness and equity on that day the God it's not fair accusation will finally be answered as the book of remembrance is opened and justice finally done.

The point is that the ultimate resolution to the harsh things we say about God to ourselves concerning the apparent injustice of the world in which we live and how it is that the wicked prosper while the righteous suffer lies in the future.

[26 : 59] It's only as we focus on that day when God shall finally show us what he now knows when he reveals the tears that we have shed and the doubts we have overcome until that day he calls upon us to trust him to fear him to stand in awe of him to honour him to look with eagerness for that day believing that our loving heavenly father knows everything about us and the situations we face today and that his grace is sufficient to carry us to the end.

You know if anyone had the right to say harsh things about God it was Jesus his son whom his father crushed on the cross.

He the righteous was punished while those who mocked him prospered. He the one who had given his all to God was denied even the slightest relief as he hung and suffered there as his tormentors drank the day away.

If anyone had the right to say harsh things about God it was his son but he did not and on the third day he rose from the dead to testify to the infinite eternal and unchangeable love and righteousness of his father.

Because the truth is that he was being punished for our unrighteousness and he was suffering for our wickedness. He was dying the sinner's death.

[28 : 39] He was paying the sinner's price and in him through faith we have life. these verses Malachi 3 6-18 read through Christ's eyes.

Let's read them through Christ's eyes. With his dual message of God giving more than he takes and knowing more than he shows this message calls us to faith and trust and obedience.

It calls us to humility before the God of whom although we have 10 million times 10 million years to learn about him we'll still only ever know the slightest part.

And so we're left with this challenge from verse 17 that on that great day will God say of us he shall be mine she shall be my treasured possession.

God calls us now to faith in Christ and then to sing with the Christian hymn writer Robin Mark Jesus all for Jesus all I am and have and ever hope to be all my ambitions hopes and plans I surrender these into your hands.

[29 : 59] miles. As as are I that in the