

# Testing God By Obediance

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[ 0 : 00 ] According to St. John, the second chapter, beginning at the first verse. Glory be to thee, O Lord. In the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

And Jesus was also bidden and his disciples to the wedding. And when the wine failed, the mother of Jesus saith unto him, They have no wine. Jesus saith unto her, O woman, what is that to thee and to me?

Mine hour is not yet come. His mother saith unto the servants, Whatsoever he saith unto you, do it. And there were set there six water pots of stone after the manner of the purifying of the Jews, containing two or three measures apiece.

Jesus saith unto them, Fill the water pots with water, and they filled them up to the brim. He saith unto them, Draw out now and bear unto the governor of the feast.

And they bare it. When the ruler of the feast had tasted the water that was made wine, and knew not whence it was, though the servants which drew the water knew, the governor of the feast called the bridegroom, and saith unto him, Every man at the beginning doth set forth good wine.

[ 1 : 28 ] And when men have well drunk, then that which is worth. For thou hast kept the good wine until now. This beginning of signs did Jesus in Cana of Galilee, and manifested forth his glory, and his disciples believed on him.

And the faith be to thee, O Lord Christ. And the confession of our faith in the words of the Nicene Creed, found beginning on page 71.

I believe, I believe in one God, God Almighty, maker of heaven and earth, and all things new and in the world, and in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only God, Son of God, God of God, God of God, life of life, very God, very God, He was and not made, being of one substance of the Father, through whom all things were made, who for us men and for our salvation, came down from heaven, and was incarnate by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, and was laid in heaven, and was crucified also for us at your conscious time.

He suffered in his spirit, and the third day he rose to gain according to the scriptures, and ascended in the heaven, and set it on the right hand of the Father, and he shall come again with glory to judge both the quick and the dead, whose kingdom shall have no end.

And I believe in the Holy Ghost, the Lord, the giver of life, who proceeded from the Father and the Son, who with the Father and the Son, together is worshipped and glorified, who is made by the prophets.

[ 3 : 18 ] And I believe, one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church, I acknowledge one baptism for the remission of sins, and I look for the resurrection of the dead, and the life of the world to come.

Amen. Now may the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be found acceptable in thy sight. O Lord, our strength, and our Redeemer.

Amen. Well, this morning I want to go on into the third chapter of the book of Malachi.

And it's found in your pew Bible on page 842. And it's an amazing chapter.

Let me just set the scene for you again, so that you can be sure to understand. Here was a people of God.

[ 4 : 33 ] They had been through all sorts of great experiences. They had been called into being under Moses. They had been constituted by Abraham.

They had been taken away into captivity. Their temple had been destroyed. They were brought back out of captivity. Their temple had been rebuilt.

Everything in place was in place, but nothing was working. And they were going on fulfilling all the ritual of their religion, but they had no sense of the power and authority of it, so that it seemed to them like something that was dead.

Everything was in place, but nothing was working. And you know how in our own bodies sometimes that happens, and it's called depression. We're not sick.

We can still see, hear, feel our hearts still beating and are still breathing, but somehow something's gone wrong, and the life has gone out of us, and we don't know what it all means.

[ 5 : 36 ] Well, that seems to have been what was happening. Now, what I want to do with this third chapter is to go through it and tell you what you can see if you read it carefully with your pencil and use your pencil as a doctor uses a scalpel to cut little bits out and put them in rows.

Well, this is what you will find out. If you read the chapter carefully, you will find out that there were sorcerers. Now, sorcerers are basically the people who rather try and know the will of God that they may be obedient to it, they try and give God the orders as to what he's going to do, and they work up all sorts of incantations and mystical powers in order to tell God how to behave.

That's the difference between magic and faith. There were adulterers, and adulterers are basically those who break down the covenants by which a society is held together.

And then there were those who swore falsely so that there was no standard of truth in the community. And there were those who oppressed the wage earner in his wages and oppressed the widow and the orphan.

And some people choose to make a living that way, not by earning it themselves, but by keeping it from those who have earned it and to whom it rightfully belongs. The wage earner was denied his wages, the widow and the orphan were denied their rights.

[ 7 : 10 ] And these people, furthermore, thrust aside the sojourner, that is, the person who came in to live among them. They thrust them aside in the same way that immigrants coming into our capitalist society are often thrust aside and not given the rights of citizenship which they own.

So that was part of the background of the nation, and you can see why they were having some problems. Well, then if you go through, you can see even among the people of God, if you go through, you can pick up all these questions.

In the two verses preceding chapter 3 of Malachi, where is the God of justice? A sense that justice was not being done. And you know how much of our conversation is made up of the fact that justice is not being done.

That we are unjustly dealt with in the shopping centers and unjustly dealt with in the courts and unjustly dealt with by various people. They had a sense that there was no God of justice.

There was no standard of justice. And God had asked them to return to him, and he said, how shall we return? They had no idea of how to change from the way they were to the way God wanted them to be.

[ 8 : 33 ] And there was all sorts of such questions which their whole religious life seemed to consist in asking these questions. How can we return to God? When God said, you are robbing me, they said, how are we robbing you?

And if you read the chapter carefully, you'll find out how they were robbing God. And then they said, how have we spoken against you? And the Lord tells them in this chapter how they had spoken against him.

But speaking against God, they had come to the conclusion, and all these are direct quotations from the third chapter of the book of Malachi. They had concluded that it was vain to serve God.

It is useless, it is useless, they said, to go about as though in mourning. And I don't know why, but it seems to me that religion is generally characterized as people going around as though they were in mourning.

And I don't know what virtue they find in that, but it's always considered to be much more religious than any other stature we can find. Our eight o'clock service this morning, it looked, I felt it was a little hard getting going at eight o'clock in the morning, and the congregation looked as though it was pretty hard too.

[ 9 : 54 ] And we may have been going around as though in mourning. But these people complained that they went around with their heads bowed and in a sense, in a posture of humbleness, and there was no advantage in doing that, they said.

They look around them and they say, the arrogant among us are blessed. They say the evildoers prosper. They put God to the test and escape.

God says, don't do this, and they do it, and God doesn't punish them for it. And that was the general morale of the people. They went on to say that the righteous and the wicked are indistinguishable.

The man who devotes himself to being righteous and the man who devotes himself to being wicked, you can't tell the difference between them. One isn't apparently prospering and the other failing. Then they say, the man who serves God is indistinguishable from the man who doesn't serve God. And so the Lord says to these people, your words have been stout against me.

[11:04] Now, one of the greatest encouragements that I always find, and I was telling people this on Wednesday night, about the Christian gospel is that it does arouse a considerable amount of opposition.

Sometimes the opposition is overt and outspoken, and sometimes it's trenchant and silent and unspeaking resentment. But the opposition is there.

And so that one of the things that happened here that Malachi detected was that the words of these people were stout against God. So you have a pretty unhappy situation.

Now, I don't think that's very different from Vancouver in 1981. God doesn't get a good breath here. See, that's my impression. I don't suppose it's different from any other part of the world, but this is the part of the world that we live in.

[12:13] And that people can speak arrogantly against God, that people can speak stoutly against him, that people can rob God, put him to the test.

All these things can happen, and it doesn't seem to matter. Nothing seems to happen. And this is one of the real problems for people, that God doesn't go around with a large package of thunderbolts straightening people out as soon as they step out of line.

And people come to resent God for not doing that. Well, this is the kind of despair and low morale which had come among the people. So then you look at the chapter and see, well, what's God going to do about it?

And then you get the other side of the story that comes out in the third chapter of Malachi. There are several things that he's going to do, but there's three that I want to talk to you about particularly. Remember that at the center of all this was the temple. And the temple, people had become callous about it. They didn't reverence the presence of God in their midst.

[13:23] God had left his temple. And it was just another building as far as they were concerned where a bunch of religious opportunists were taking advantage of them.

But you see how chapter 3 starts? Behold, I send my messenger to prepare the way before me. The Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple.

That suddenly things will be transformed and it will be apparent that the Lord has come to his temple. That he has come to dwell among his people again.

And then suddenly the lights will go on and all that is wrong will suddenly be rectified. And the saints say, oh that this would come soon.

And the sinners say, it'll probably never come. So both of them are waiting. One hoping that it doesn't happen. The other hoping that it happens soon.

[14:27] And the promise is that the messenger will come and the Lord will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

Behold, he is coming says the Lord of hosts. So that the whole problem is seen as people, as the Lord not being present among his people.

And that we have to discover, to rediscover, or God has to come graciously among us and make himself known. Well then, in the second paragraph of the chapter, what's he going to do when he comes?

Well, there's two powerful pictures there. He's going to come like a bleacher and he's going to pour all the bleach into the water and all the dirt is going to be scrubbed out of the community of the people of God.

He's going to come with judgment and the judgment for which people long will suddenly come. And then, in the second instance, he's going to come like a refiner of precious metal and he's going to put the precious metals in the retort and he's going to turn up the heat under them until all the dross and all that is impure is burned out.

[15:49] So that there are two powerful pictures of judgment. One of the commentators says that what the refiner of precious metals does is to put them all there and to turn the heat up under them and as the impurities are burned out, so ultimately the refiner can begin to see his own face reflected in the pool of precious metal that's been melted down by the flame.

Well, that's a lovely picture, isn't it? A picture of God turning up the heat under his people until he can begin to see his image restored among them.

And that's the judgment that he's going to bring. Well, then the second thing that he's going to do or the third thing that he's going to do, he's going to return, he's going to bring judgment, and then he invites them to put him to the test.

Now, there are two tests spoken of in Malachi 3, the people who put God to the test by defying his commandments and seeing if he punished them, and apparently he didn't.

Well, now there's another test he speaks about, and that is the test of obeying him and seeing if he blesses them. And this is the great test of obedience, and it comes in verse 10 when he says, if you want to test me, bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house, and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts.

[ 17 : 31 ] Don't test me by your disobedience any longer to see what you can get away with. Try testing me by your obedience. And the kind of obedience he asks for is that they will bring the full tithe into the storehouse and see if God will not bless them.

And of course, that's such a lovely picture of testing God, not testing him with our disobedience, which most of us are good at, but testing him by our deliberate and chosen obedience.

try and obey him for a change, and see if God doesn't bless you. And it goes on to speak of the kind of blessing that he will bring if you will test him in that way.

And I just long that we as a congregation might try testing God by obeying him, obeying him in some personal and radical way.

by setting out to deliberately be obedient to him in some area of our lives that we may test his grace and his mercy and see the fulfillment of it.

[ 18 : 49 ] Well, he talks about the blessing that he will bring upon them when he says it will be like opening the windows of heaven for you and pouring down an overflowing blessing.

the last time God opened the windows was back in the days of Noah when he poured out the water. It says he opened the windows and the floods came and that was judgment.

But here Malachi speaks of another kind of opening of the windows and the pouring out of blessing upon the people. And then there's a peculiar and I want to conclude with this.

There's a peculiar and wonderful paragraph. that's contained in this chapter. And it begins with verse 16. He says, Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another.

In among this people and in among all this disobedience and in among all this deliberate testing of God with disobedience, there was a community of people who feared the Lord.

[ 20 : 00 ] And fear and worship are the same thing in the Old Testament. Lots of young couples come to me and look over the marriage service and they don't want to commit themselves to fearing the Lord.

And as you know, it would be a great thing if we did commit ourselves to fearing the Lord. We're afraid of so many other things that aren't worthy of our fear, and we should learn to fear the Lord.

Those who worship the Lord who feared him spoke with one another, and the Lord heeded and heard them, and a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and thought on his name.

He was important to them, and there was a remnant of the people in the midst of all this apathy and in the midst of all this turning away from God.

There were those who feared the Lord, and whose names were written in a book, and they were known to God. And you have this wonderful promise in verse 17.

[ 21 : 12 ] They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, my special possession on the day when I act, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.

And that will be the means by which God will reveal his mercy. He will reveal his mercy and his blessing upon those who fear him.

Now Malachi is a man with a great heart, and he is concerned for people, and he sees the inevitability of judgment coming upon people, and of judgment being not the kind of judgment that confirms people, but the kind of judgment that destroys the shallowness and emptiness and hollowness of so many people's lives.

And Malachi doesn't want to see that happen to them. He doesn't want to see the terrible judgment of God fall upon people, but he wants them to see his God as a God of mercy and a God of love.

And he sees in the midst of all this unbelief and disobedience a company of people who fear the Lord. And it's in this company of people, to this company of people, that God is going to demonstrate his mercy and demonstrate his love and demonstrate his purpose as they hold on to faith in him in the midst of all this unbelief.

[ 22 : 49 ] And God is going to be able to demonstrate that he isn't, in the last analysis, a God who desires to bring judgment upon people, but a God who desires to bring love upon his people.

This is all but the last chapter of the Old Testament. And it foresees the coming of John the Baptist and heralding the coming of Christ.

it foresees the coming of the kingdom. And God ultimately vindicating himself and demonstrating his love as Jesus Christ comes suddenly among the people.

And with him inevitably comes judgment. But with him comes the demonstration of that mystery which men had longed to see through all the ages of the Old Testament.

the demonstration of how God ultimately shows forth his love. And this service of Holy Communion for us this morning is the remembrance of the death of Christ on the cross to demonstrate the reality of the love of God for each one of us.

[ 24 : 12 ] we are all invited to participate and to receive that love and that blessing which God gives us in the remembrance of the death of his son in the partaking of the bread and wine.

So that in a wonderful way, in the midst of all this apathy and unbelief, the promise of the coming of the messenger of the covenant, tells us of Christ's coming and of the establishment of a new relationship and our participating in this Holy Communion, receiving the bread and wine, is entering into that new relationship and to that new covenant.

May God grant that we, in each of our lives, sense that coming of God's love to us in the person of Jesus Christ.

Amen.