

The Importance of Biblical Community

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[0 : 00] Would you turn to the book of Malachi, which is the last book in the Old Testament? One. You've probably heard this before, but I don't know if your Bibles has...

You've probably not got these in a digital version of a Bible, but this is the best of the paper version. Have you got a blank bit of paper between Malachi and Matthew? No?

Just New Testament, yes. It's almost blank with a few words on. Well, that blank bit of paper covers 400 years. I thought it was 400 years in between Malachi and Matthew.

If you've got the Bible on your phone, those 400 years have disappeared, I guess. I just don't know. So this reminds me of some of that paperwork where it prints on a white sheet of paper, this page is left intentionally blank.

And you think, well, it isn't. Have you ever come across that? Yeah. Anyway. Less of the distraction. I know that I can distract myself marvelously well.

[1 : 23] We're going to read from verse 13 onwards, even though our focus is really drawing into the latter part. So, I'm sorry.

Malachi chapter 3, verse 13. Yeah, I'm sorry about that. Now, hear God's word. Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord.

But you say, how have we spoken against you? You have said, it is vain to serve God. What is the profit of keeping his charge or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts?

And now we call the arrogant blessed. Evil does not only prosper, but they put God to the test and they escape. Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another.

The Lord paid attention and heard them. And a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts.

[2 : 32] In the day when I make up my treasured possession, I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between the one who serves God and the one who does not serve him.

Well, may God bless that apparently simple word. Please, if you would open again your Bibles to Malachi as you're doing that or as you have done that.

This is very much in the same theme as what we addressed last week from the Sermon on the Mount, or at least a part of the Sermon of the Mount.

And that really has to do with a biblical community. And therefore a lot of things this evening have to be taken into consideration.

One of those things, I guess, which has to be taken into consideration is perhaps the immediate difficulty of why there is two groups amongst God's people.

[3 : 49] I mean, we tend to read it, if we read it carefully, it's quite easy to see that there is God's people.

And therefore, we tend to read it, if we read it carefully, divided into two groups of which one group is looking at the evildoers of the world and coveting their ways. And therefore, we shouldn't be surprised at all that two groups amongst God's people seem to exist throughout the ages.

And therefore, just to put it really simply, which group do you want to be in? And that's the kind of stage that's been set here by Malachi.

Malachi. And the reason Malachi sets it that way is because he sets it in the context that God remembers. That God remembers.

Now, you would imagine that there should only be one distinct group of God's people. And of course, one day there will be. But until that day, it doesn't always seem to be the case.

[5 : 00] But what should be remembered by us here this evening is that God remembers. A book of remembrance is written. And it's written about the type of conversation that people have in those

groups.

And there's something odd about conversations, isn't there? You're depending on what kind of group you're in or what kind of friends you're around with. And how quickly the conversation can stop because somebody else has joined the group.

Why does that happen? Well, could it be because some of the things that we're talking about we shouldn't be talking about? Could it be because one of the things that we're talking about is actually a surprise for the person who's joined the group?

And therefore, it would ruin the surprise if you carried on speaking about it. Well, that kind of stopping the conversation would be a good kind of stopping, wouldn't it? But it's quite clear here that God pays attention to what is talked about amongst his people.

And the fact that God's people talk about him amongst each other. That God is, if I can say, the hot topic of our conversation. Now, we get together to talk about God.

[6 : 11] Someone coined the phrase once, I don't know who. Well, Malachi perhaps got there first by saying, what about gossiping God? What about gossiping God amongst one another?

Well, this really isn't about gossip as such, but it is about words and it is about conversation. And it's also about what God remembers. And the fact that God remembers, again, is an interesting thought because it tells us here that God writes a book of remembrance, but God doesn't need a book to help him remember.

So you've got to ask the question, what's the purpose of the book? If God doesn't need help, if God doesn't need a diary, and he doesn't need a record book to help him remember, then what is the purpose of having such a book?

Why does Malachi want us to know that such a book even exists? Well, because their names are going to be put in it. Okay, but God's able to remember the names without a book. Yeah, but what they say is going to be put in it.

Okay, but God's able to remember the names and what they say without it being written in a book. Yeah, but it's to do with the whole span of their life. Okay, but we're talking about God here.

[7 : 28] God remembers perfectly. This is why you have that very famous verse in Scripture where it says when it comes to sin that God chooses to remember no more your sins.

He doesn't forget them, but he actively chooses to remember them no more. So God has not got a problem with forgetting. God has not got a problem with memory.

He remembers everything. So the issue is, is why a book of remembrance? Well, it seems to me that Malachi wants to stress the point to you, the listener, that God remembers.

That God takes special and particular interest in who you are and what you say.

And by drawing our attention to this book of remembrance by which names are written in it, because it doesn't aid God, it must be there for our benefit in some way for us to know something.

[8 : 28] And the thing that we are to know from this is the amount of emphasis that God wants placed on you remembering that he remembers. Okay?

Okay? What you remember about God and talk about God, God remembers. And God wants you to know, to live every day knowing that he remembers every day.

Everything that you talk about God, God's got it all. So here's really the summary of how this unfolds.

It's clear that there are two groups of people. One group of people have lost their way entirely, it seems, and this is indicated by their conversation. And another way are engaged in faithful conversation.

And the groups are distinct because of those reasons. You could call them the fault finders and the faithful. Okay? Those who are engaged in faithful conversation and those who are not engaged in faithful conversation.

[9 : 31] And, of course, two groups mean that one group existed originally amongst God's people. And, you know, perhaps you've been in the situation where you've been out to a friend's house and, you know, the friend's not a Christian.

And they've got a lot of other non-Christian friends around. And suddenly the conversation takes a turn for the worse. And you begin to realize, you know, I can't stay in this room anymore.

I can't be caught up, even though I'm not going to join in their conversation. But I can't be caught up in that. I'm going to have to leave. Because, you know, if I stay here, I'm going to have to say something.

You know, or I'm going to have to leave. And, you know, there's probably many a times that we've been in places where that's happened. Where the group becomes distinct by the type of conversation they have.

And you either feel part of that group or you feel completely out of it. Because the conversation divides the group simply by what's being talked about.

[10:33] Well, in many ways, that's kind of what's happened here amongst God's people. What they're talking about, you know, what is nurtured in the group by what they're talking about.

So when God says here that he remembers, he's not remembering one group and not remembering the other group. He remembers both. He says there's going to come a day where you will see the distinction for yourself between the righteous and the wicked.

That would be the day that I separate them, like the parable of the good fish and the bad fish.

Where God separates the good fish from the bad fish. The sheep from the goats. You know, that day is going to come.

And God is able to remember who's where in order to make that separation himself. But there are two groups that already exist here.

God wants us to see the blessing of being remembered by him. He wants us to know exactly the benefits and blessing of God remembering us. But more importantly, what it is that he is remembering about us.

[11:37] That we are engaged in faithful conversation about him. That when we talk about God, it is favorably. That when we talk about God, it is praiseworthy. And that when we come into contact with other people, though we're not talking about God all the time, if ever the subject of God came up or the person of God came up, then we are faithful always in our response in talking about God.

Well, that's important to God. So important, in fact, he says that I will take record of it, of your name and your conversation in the book. A book of remembrance will be written with your name in it if you are such a person engaged in such a way.

God remembers your love for him. God remembers your faithfulness towards him, what you talk about. And God wants you to know that's important. So as you sit here this evening, God wants you to know that he's remembered everything you've said.

Dare I say especially about him, but everything that you said. So being remembered by God in this way is, of course, of huge importance. And I think that in this age where we have, dare I say it, and I want to say it gently, but I want to attack the issue head on, where people do suffer from Alzheimer's.

And I've seen many a Christian suffer with Alzheimer's and then pass away. And thankful to God that their salvation is not dependent on them remembering what they ought to believe.

[13:08] But actually entirely dependent on God who remembers. You know, very similar to the thief on the cross who doesn't say, he doesn't say, I remember you, I believe that you're the son of God dying on the cross.

He simply says, remember me when you enter into your kingdom. You remember me. He doesn't stress what he knows about Jesus. He doesn't proclaim necessarily, you know, faith well explained on the cross.

He simply says to Jesus, remember me when you enter into your kingdom. In other words, even he understood the importance of God doing the remembering. Favorably remembering him.

And that's the kind of remembering that's happening here. God favorably remembering you. And what he remembers about you.

Isn't it interesting, depending on what type of funeral you go to. And especially if you know the person really, really well. And then somebody gets up and gives their testimony or their life. And they start saying things.

[14:11] Okay, 90% of it was true. In that person, only 60. But no one's going to say anything because it's a funeral. Okay? But God knows everything.

God knows everything. And you don't want to name and shame people at a funeral. But it is interesting how, you know, even with social media. Only portray what you want to portray.

You don't portray everything. You know, I feel sorry. Imagine if King David was in social media. Imagine if Solomon was in social media. Can you imagine the stuff that would be written about them? That suddenly all the, you know, warts and all.

But no, when we do it, or if you're into that kind of thing. No, you paint a very shiny picture. Why do you do that? Well, because we know, we know what needs to be portrayed.

What we want to be portrayed. But we're dealing here with a God who remembers. Not just what you portray. But, you know, the motives. The actions in everything.

[15:16] God says there's going to be a distinction at the end of the day. That he will make between the one who serves God and the one who does not. Between the one who is righteous and the one who is wicked. And God is able to make that distinction.

Why? Well, because he remembers. So here are the two groups. And we're going to deal with the first group first, of course. They say, having lost their way, that it is vain to serve God.

There's no point to it. There's no point to be involved in any kind of liturgical priority. There's no need to go to prayer. There's no need to go to worship.

There's no need to engage in communion. There's no need to, you know. Of course, this is Old Testament liturgies and customs that they're talking about. Not New Testament ones. But I'm just sort of transferring them across.

And they say it's vain to serve God. And you've got to understand, how does a person get to that point where they say, do you know, it's no longer worth serving God? How does anybody in the church get to that point?

[16:17] Well, it seems to me that they get to it in exactly the same way as the people get to it here. Through breaking the Tenth Commandment. Or breaking the First and the Tenth.

You know, falling out of love with God is an obvious way to get lost, isn't it? But so often we don't think we've fallen out of love with God when we break the other commandments. But normally when they're broken, they're broken in order.

You know, we don't break the Eighth without going through the other Seven. You know, it's just that we've redefined them in a slightly different way. And perhaps we can, you know, mingle it around.

But generally speaking, these people here have broken the Tenth. And perhaps they haven't realized that they've broken it. The Tenth, by the way, is coveting. Coveting your neighbor's goods. They look at these evildoers who seem to be able to prosper, seem to be able to test God and get away with it. They seem to be able to escape. And they look at them and suddenly the conclusion that they draw from it, well, it's vain to serve God.

[17:22] In other words, if they can get away with it, why can't I? And this leads us to the second problem. And that is that they belong to a God they know nothing about.

In other words, or they know very little about. They misunderstand the very God that they belong to. And this is devastating for anybody who does belong to God.

But they look at these other people covetously, thinking, well, what profit is it to serve God?

Because these people over here who don't do what they like, profit, test God in what they're doing, and God leaves them alone.

But here I am, all day long, busting my gut, as it was, to serve God. And all I get at the end of it is, well, it's not like the previous pastor did it.

Or, it's not the way we used to do it. And you can understand how those kind of comments, right, can destroy a person.

[18:31] Well, suddenly the conversation is not quite as edifying. Well, whatever the case may be. But what's happening?

Well, one of the things that's happening here that people fail to realize, and this is devastating, especially for young Christians in the church, and they really need to be taught this, is that when a person in the world is able to prosper not belonging to God and not believing in God, when they're able to get away with doing what they want, and every sort of plan and purpose of them seems to succeed, and they're getting exactly what they want out of life, or so it seems, for the moment, they fail to recognize that they're actually under the wrath of God rather than the blessing of God.

And the reason they fail to recognize it, because how can that be the judgment of God? Because it looks like so much blessing in their life. And yet Romans 1 clearly teaches that one of the ways which God's wrath is revealed against men and women, boys and girls in this world, is just by handing them over to their own desires.

That's odd, isn't it? That one of the sure signs of being under the wrath of God in the present day, in Malachi's day, is actually for God to let you do what you want.

And yet when you misunderstand that, what you do is you look at these people covetously, and you think, well, how can they who don't belong to God get everything that they want, and I don't?

[20 : 00] And that's affirmed, again, throughout the rest of the New Testament, where it says that God doesn't discipline the neighbor's children. He disciplines his own.

And so the reason why his own children can't get away with what they want is because they're not under wrath, but under grace. The reason why God's children can't get away with whatever they want being left to their own desires is because God disciplines his children like a father disciplines his son.

In other words, this discipline is not a judgment, but a blessing. But too often, upon God's people, it's seen as a judgment because he's just not letting me have what I want.

And now I feel judged, and they look like they're blessed. And so without a careful, biblical understanding of the Word of God, it's very easy to get these two mixed up, isn't it?

It's very easy to become extremely covetousness of your next-door neighbor who seems to have everything, and nothing ever goes wrong in their house, and, you know, you think, why?

[21 : 08] They don't pray, they don't repent, and God, God who's in control of everything, seems to be blessing them. Well, okay, I can understand how it looks like that. But Malachi in Romans and elsewhere in the New Testament clearly teaches us, no, you're seeing it wrong.

That when God allows a person to go their own way, that's not a blessing. That's not a blessing, no more than it is for a parent to let their children go wherever they want, without any form of discipline. That's not blessing. That's wrath. That's judgment. But discipline, God sort of interfering with your life, interacting with your life all the time, well, that's blessing.

God not letting you have your own way is blessing, not judgment. Why? Because all things work together for the good. And that's what God's doing, working all things together for the good.

The others, they're under the wrath. And so these group of people who think that it is vain to serve God have paid too much attention to the unbelievers of the world and their blessings without enough biblical education.

[22 : 25] So much so that their biblical education is so low that they have become covetousness and then in the process think, well, what's the point of serving God? And how many in the church, you know, I mean, how long do you serve God before you get to the point of thinking, I'm looking to give this up now?

Okay. After eight years, ten years, twenty years, I can understand that perhaps another ministry or just a short-term break before you get back, I can understand that.

But how often do people start things with the intention of, well, when can I give it up? You know, how long does that thought enter into the person's head of, well, you know, time to give it up now?

Well, why start it in the first place? In other words, where do these thoughts come from? Where does that kind of motivation and attitude to sort of consider what you're doing is, I'm not making any difference?

As a minister, I've lived with that for the last 18 years of ministry, thinking, I just hope and pray that when I make it through the fire that there might just be one thing that'll make it through with me.

[23 : 41] Well, why? And yet, too often, it's, you know, the negative sets in, what's the point? Well, it shouldn't. It shouldn't, should it?

Here's the second group. Now, they don't have a diminished devotion to the Lord. You know, their devotion is not gone entirely. It's clearly that God is the center of their attention.

They're engaged in faithful conversation. They fear the Lord, which means it's the three factors of fear which come into play here, that not only do they fear the Lord because the Lord is the Lord, and not only do they fear the Lord reverently, in the sense that he is God, you know, why wouldn't you be afraid of God?

He's all-powerful. But why wouldn't you honor God? Well, you would. So I fear him in that way. But then thirdly, most people who love somebody else fear offending them.

Most people who love somebody else properly fear offending them. And so, when you fear the Lord in this way, you fear offending the one that you love. And that's what these people are doing here.

[24 : 52] They fear God in all three ways. And of course, they esteem God's name highly, which is another way of saying that they praise his name. In other words, praise is saying back to God what is true of his nature, character, and attributes, and everything.

That's praise. To say true things about God and of course, live in accordance with them. God is the very center, it seems, without any difficulty of their conversation.

Now, this is what we need to understand. We need to understand how did that group become that group and not the other group. In other words, why are you faithful and not unfaithful?

Why do you consider the Lord's work not to be vanity rather than vanity? What makes the difference? I mean, if it is the case that God's people can be divided and God's people can be either in one group or the other group, what makes you be in the right group?

What causes that? Well, here's the point. This is a biblical point throughout the whole of the Old and New Testament and it's this, that individual flourishing, and by that I mean you as an individual flourishing before God, being the very best you can be in this world before God right now, is connected with no shadow of a doubt with the congregation's flourishing.

[26 : 25] In other words, you cannot be fully the person you are meant to be without being in a congregation that flourishes. Now, here's where it gets tricky.

And a congregation cannot flourish unless individually each person is personally devoted to the Lord.

So this is how it works. Individual flourishing is connected strongly to congregational flourishing. But congregational flourishing is connected strongly to individual devotion to the Lord.

the Lord. And here's where we get it from. Psalm 1. In Psalm 1, we read that the man who devotes himself to the Lord strongly, doesn't go in the ways of the wicked, but to the Lord, is like a tree planted by streams of living water producing, in its season, fruit.

And we know, because we're old enough to know, that trees don't eat their own fruit. fruit. You've never seen a tree eat its own apple, or a pear tree eat its own pear, or a cherry tree eat its own cherry.

[27 : 38] You've never seen that. No, you know that God created trees with fruit for others. And what God is saying about this man who personally devotes himself to the Lord is that he is a supreme blessing to others.

Not just to himself, but to others. Now you get a bunch of these trees together that just so happen not to be trees, but people. And all of these people are producing things in their life that are not for themselves, but for others.

Then you get a congregation that flourishes. Supremely flourishes. And this is why individual flourishing is connected to congregational flourishing. This is why some people in some congregations and in some fellowships can just feel themselves withering away.

Because the close-knit group that they have are not individually devoted to the Lord and therefore not producing fruit for the wider group.

So this idea that we can somehow belong and not belong to a group, it's just not true. It's just not true. To be committed to a church is to be committed to your own family. It's a biblical family.

[28 : 56] It's God's family. And therefore, my own personal will benefit you or it'll be to your detriment. Because I'll be taking from you rather than having something to give you.

And that's not the way God's people are meant to be. That's the other group. But this group here, the second group, faithful conversation, they're feeding off one another. they're enjoying one another's company.

They're enjoying the blessing that they get from being with one another. Why? Because individually, they must be very devoted to the Lord, which produces their fruit and season, which they themselves don't eat, but produce it for the wider congregation.

And therefore, this congregational flourishing leads to individual flourishing because there is always going to be one or two people in the congregation that just can't manage to pray, that find it very spiritually difficult.

And it's supremely important just to be in the company of people who are flourishing so that you can feed off them and so that you can benefit from them.

[30 : 00] I mean, what do you think Sunday school if it isn't that? What do you think Sunday school is if you don't think it's that? What do you think any ministry that flourishes is if it isn't that?

Who benefits the most in Sunday school? The teachers or the children? Well, of course, there's great benefit for the teachers in one sense to see the joy of the Lord in it all, but is it not the children that are eating the fruit of the parents and eating the fruit of the teachers and eating the fruit of the leaders?

Isn't that reason to be involved in ministry in this church? To feed others? So, let's not have any idea that you can flourish as an individual on your own.

You can't. You can't. You just can't produce enough fruit for yourself, to put it that way. The individuals do need to be devoted to the Lord personally, but they need to be able to do that in a congregation that's doing it together so that we can all flourish and all benefit of each other's fruit. Let me put this a slightly different way. Who took care of Jesus' material needs while he was on earth? I mean, let's not forget that we're saved by a homeless man, by the way, and that we're called to deny ourselves, take up our cross, following a homeless man.

[31 : 27] But who took care of that homeless man who just so happens to be God the Son on earth? And who took care of the disciples' material needs when they followed Jesus and left their fishing nets behind?

Who took care of them? Or was it not the fruit produced by the wider community of God's people? Of course it was. But too often we just don't see that.

Too often we just depend entirely upon God, which we ought to do, but fail to see how God provides through the community of his people. Let me put it another way. Last week you heard a message on anxiety and how the kingdom that Jesus is speaking about is not something to be anxious in. But we can understand why anxiety would spring up. I mean, if you're being asked to leave your fishing nets and your boat behind, what's the first question going to happen? Well, how am I going to feed myself? How am I going to feed my family?

You know, Peter's mother-in-law would have been on his case from day one. What are you going to do, Peter? Well, who's going to look after him if he's left behind the means that he uses to look after people?

[32 : 38] So great anxiety can spring up when you're asked to follow Jesus Christ, especially in light of the kingdom, simply because of the demands that it makes. But that's not the only thing that causes anxiety.

I don't think so. I think the other thing that causes anxiety is the fact that I may not be in a community that will do the same. And therefore, if I do it, then it becomes not only situationally costly, but it becomes disproportionately costly.

Because I'm giving everything up in a community that isn't. One of the ways that Jesus answers this is in Mark 10 and Acts 4, look, no one leaves their mothers, their brothers, their sisters, their fathers, their house, their lands, no one leaves any of that who does not end up with more brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers, houses, families, and lands when they follow me.

Why? Well, because you're joining a community of people that have done exactly the same thing. But I can understand the anxiety. The anxiety is not just based on the fact that I won't have enough, but it's based on the fact that I may not be in a community where everyone will be the same.

And therefore, I retract and I look out for myself and what I can get for myself and make sure that I can provide my own security. I end up serving money without realizing it because of the anxiety of not, it's not just about not having material needs, but that, it's the thing that came before that.

[34 : 21] Which is, how did I even get to the point where I'm no longer serving God but serving material needs? Well, I got to that point because I find myself in a community that doesn't share that idea.

Now you can see the problem. It's huge. The kind of community and faithful conversation that God is remembering here is deep. It's simple to understand, but now you begin to understand why one group is sort of mimetically following the unbelievers because they are imitating them.

They are coveting after worldly goods. They now think it's vain to serve God. Their devotion has slipped and now they've slipped into a world where they simply serve themselves not thinking about the others.

They've broken the Tenth Commandment and perhaps they don't even realize that they've done it. they are coveting the very things that the people around them are coveting. That they're profiting and why can't I profit?

And God's people find it tough in an environment like that, especially when they're amongst God's people who are doing that very thing because the negative effect it has on the faithful believer is, well, if they're looking out for themselves, it's going to be really hard for me now not to do the same because if I live like Jesus wants me to live, it's going to be disproportionately costly to me.

[35 : 52] And how long is that going to last? And so the type of community that Jesus is actually looking at and addressing, the faithful, those who fear God and esteem his name, doesn't exist and

therefore gives rise to much anxiety and much retractment and much seeking my own will rather than the will of God and the benefit of others.

But that's not the people God writes in his book. They're not the people who are remembered. Well, they are remembered if you know what I mean.

But they're not written in this book. Those that are written in this book are those who fear God, who esteem his name, engaged with one another, feeding off one another's fruit in faithful conversation. So here's the exhortation as we close. Remember who God remembers. And remember who God remembers in this way by writing your names down in a book.

Remember what's remembered. Don't just remember that God remembers, but rather remember what God is remembering. And God remembers what he's taught his people.

[37 : 06] That's how he's able to hold us all accountable because he can say to us, but I've told you this. And for us, we have it written down before us.

We can turn to it every day in the freedom that we have. This is what he's told us. And God remembers those who are engaged in heart and mind and soul in faithful conversation about him. God remembers those who speak well of him, fear him, love him, praise his name, esteem him, in belief and behaviour, of course.

And here's the conclusion. I want to be in a flourishing community. And I want you to want to be in a flourishing community. And the only way to get there, the only way to be in this second group of the people who are engaged in faithful conversation, is if individually we are totally devoted to God in a congregation that does the same.

Where the costs are spread out when it comes to following Jesus. They are muted in a fellowship because we're able to serve one another's needs. And therefore following Jesus is difficult enough.

[38 : 25] And we don't want to make it more difficult and less biblical by simply looking out for ourselves. But rather we want to spread the cost, as it were, of denying ourselves, taking up our cross and following Jesus.

We want to be engaged in this kind of faithful conversation, individual devotion. Not just for our own benefit. It will lead to that. But first, that we would be like the tree that produces fruit that doesn't eat its own fruit.

But everyone else gets to benefit by it. These are the people who have their names written down in this book. These are the people that God pays attention to.

These are the people that on the day when there is a great separation are God's treasured possession, kept for eternity. Amen.

Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.