

Seek not your due reward, but God's gracious gift*Malachi 3:13-18*

Your words have been stout against me, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, What have we spoken so much against thee? ¹⁴ Ye have said, It is vain to serve God: and what profit is it that we have kept his ordinance, and that we have walked mournfully before the LORD of hosts? ¹⁵ And now we call the proud happy; yea, they that work wickedness are set up; yea, they that tempt God are even delivered. ¹⁶ ¶ Then they that feared the LORD spake often one to another: and the LORD hearkened, and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before him for them that feared the LORD, and that thought upon his name. ¹⁷ And they shall be mine, saith the LORD of hosts, in that day when I make up my jewels; and I will spare them, as a man spareth his own son that serveth him. ¹⁸ Then shall ye return, and discern between the righteous and the wicked, between him that serveth God and him that serveth him not.

Dear Christian Friends,

Every parent here with children old enough to speak complete sentences has heard the sentence, "It's not fair!" Now, almost invariably what they mean is "give me what I want!" But everyone, young and old, seeks to justify their own desires. Therefore it is easier to blame your parents when things do not go your way. In our Gospel lesson, the laborers in the vineyard in Jesus' parable voiced this same complaint to the lord of the vineyard. "It's not fair that these, who worked in the vineyard for only an hour, should get the same as we who have worked all day." In our sermon lesson, certain of the Jews make the same complaint to the Lord, "It's not fair that we who follow the law of God suffer, and mourn for our sins and get no tangible reward for this, whereas the godless rejoice and prosper." How unchanging is the heart of man!

What should we expect of God if we demand that He deal with us according to what is fair? The parable of the workers in the vineyard teaches us all an important lesson about the kingdom of heaven: Anything at all that we receive from our Lord has nothing to do with how good a worker we were. No doubt the people hearing this parable were puzzled. How could the lord of the vineyard give the late workers the same as the early workers. Surely they should have received very little. But hear again the words with which he answers the complainers, "Is it not lawful for me to do what I wish with mine own things? Is thine eye evil, because I am good?" The reward which the Lord of creation gives to any of His children who have labored for Him in the world is a reward of goodness and mercy. It is true, those who worked only for an hour did not earn a full day's wages. The truth of the kingdom of God is that *all* of the things which God gives are equally rewards of goodness and mercy, entirely undeserved. So what is fair? What is the reward that they truly deserved? Let no man demand that God treat us fairly, or He will quickly learn the truth of Lamentations 3:22, "It is of the Lord's

mercies that we are not consumed." Yet as surely as God rebukes those who accuse Him of unfair treatment, so surely does He also promise us His mercy and grace. There is a reward for faithfulness, a reward of boundless love and grace. Therefore do not seek your due reward, but rather God's gracious gift.

The complaint of the Judaeans in the first verses of our lesson should be familiar. They are presumptuous words, and that is what makes them so foolish. "It's useless to serve the Lord! What have we gained by keeping his commandments? We parade before Him, mourning our sins, and what good has it done us? We are still lowly and oppressed. Meanwhile the proud and arrogant heathens are having a grand old time. The wicked are living high on the hog. Those who recklessly tempt God are delivered from their own foolishness." Think carefully on those words. And why do these words sound familiar? You may not hear them put in the same way, but they are the thoughts of your heart and mine.

Our country is heading into a recession, maybe even a depression. What caused it? Greed, and nothing but greed. I'm not talking about the greed of the bankers, although that is certainly a part of it. I'm talking about the greed of millions of Americans who insisted that "I have to have this now because I deserve it" even though they did not have the money to pay for it. Some Americans have been more wise, and have saved their money and spent wisely, but they are in the minority. Now think back in the last twenty or thirty years at all the people who kept buying more and more because it wasn't fair that they had less than their neighbors. Meanwhile the frugal lived modestly, and largely did without. What did their wisdom gain them? Their friends and neighbors were living the high life, rejoicing, recklessly spending and loving it, never seeming to have to face the consequences of their actions. As the economy crashes, *now* they begin to understand, and the frugal are looking more and more wise every day. But just a few years ago the frugal seemed foolish. Why not do what everybody else does? Spend what they do not have? Everybody else is doing it? Of course, that would really be saying, "Why not join everybody else on the road to financial ruin."

You see, that is how it is with the children of God in this world. I said that your heart and mine has such thoughts about God's Word and our lot in this world. Here we are, faithfully attending our local church, hearing the Word of God, confessing our sins every Sunday, agreeing to strive to follow His commandments every day of our lives, and to believe on the forgiveness of sins in God's Son. And it is not only in church, but throughout our days. We honor our parents, don't steal or commit adultery or hurt anyone. What is the result? Is our life better because of it? Look at the wicked. *They* do *none* of these things, and they are none the worse for wear. They are having a *good* time. Why can't *I* have that also?

It's not fair!

So it seems to us now. But what is the truth of the matter with the wicked? What about those who neither confess their sins, nor acknowledge the Lord who made them? As it is with the economy of the state, so it is with the economy of sin. It *always* has a price, and that price will *always* be paid. The payment may be delayed, it may be put off for years, for decades. But finally the crash comes. The recession or depression of an economy is nothing compared to the destruction of a soul when God finally does what is truly fair, and gives to them the due reward for every deed they have done, every word they have spoken. The world is enticing to Christians not because God is unfair, but in fact because He is gracious, and He is giving every man in this world the time and opportunity to come to a knowledge of their sin, and repent. But by and large men use this time in vain, and pursue their own pleasures above all things. Therefore it is the world's misuse of the time of grace that entices Christians to leave God's family. I wish that every child who is enticed by the world to leave father and mother, and all their sisters and brothers in Christ would see the pleasure of the world for what it is: a waste of the most precious resource that God has given men: the time to repent.

But if you are not convinced, if the world still seems better to you than the household of your heavenly Father, then perhaps you should consider what it would mean for you if God treated you fairly, if He rewarded you according to all the things that you have done for Him, according to the measure of your faithfulness to Him. Would you like God to treat you or me fairly if we have done our best to obey Him, to hear His word, and even to mourn our sins? God forbid that He ever treats you fairly if this is the way you regard Him, for the only fair thing He can do is to cast you out from His presence where you can dwell with your wicked brethren in the world. You have a gracious God. By grace He offers you what you could never earn. There is nothing fair about His grace, because you can do nothing to deserve it. The only possible way to receive His reward is by seeking it purely by His grace. "If" you have been faithful, "If" you have tried to obey, all these "ifs" are meaningless. You can say with the Judeans, "What profit is there in keeping God's ordinances?" No profit at all so far as your soul is concerned, for you can never keep them well enough for it to matter. The only thing that matters in that you come to him as a sinner, asking not for what you deserve, but for His compassion which you can never earn.

The person who asks "if", who thinks of "fairness" can only come to one rational conclusion, that it is useless to follow the Lord, because no matter what you do, God will never be happy with your performance or progress. He will always find you deficient. There is no peace to be found in such reasoning. They that fear the Lord do not find their peace in this

way. Where do they find it? Hear the words of the prophet. "They that feared the Lord spoke often to one another: and the Lord hearkened and heard it, and a book of remembrance was written before Him for them that feared the Lord, and that thought upon His name."

My friends, we do not come together as Christian people, in a church, or in our homes because we are following a rule, "If i do this" or because we want God to treat us fairly. We come together to speak often to one another of what God has done for us, to think upon His name, and His works. God has given us a book of remembrance. What is in this book, His Holy Word, that we are to remember? There is nothing in here that we have done. This book has already been written. It is His story. It is the story of Jesus Christ. It is the story of all the wonderful things that God has done for you. He has given this book to the whole world, but only you who listen to it, who speak of it to one another get any benefit at all from what He has written. Therefore He says that this book is written for you.

Malachi was the last of the prophets. It is no coincidence that in this prophecy God speaks of the book which he has caused to be written for those who fear Him and think on His name. God was telling them that the old revelation was now ended, and no more word would be heard until He had done what He promised to do. This is not a word of dread, but of great and everlasting hope! The complains of the people, that it is vain to serve God, would be answered by God's greatest service to men. Christ, His Son, the singular focus of all the prophets, would fulfill every Word of God. Let no man ever complain that God is unfair to men, for indeed it is true that He is unfair. Upon His Son, who had done no wrong, was poured out all God's wrath against our sin. What is fair about that? That justice should have been ours.

But what is the result? God is gracious to us and blesses us. To those who are faithful, who diligently hear His Word and think on His name, the name of Salvation and life, He says, "They shall be mine. In that day, when I make up my jewels; I will spare them as a man spares his own son that serves him." The jewels that He makes are His gifts of forgiveness of sins, and an everlasting inheritance. He does not say, "I will treat those as sons because they have served me." He only says "I will spare them, *as*" that is *as if they were* "a son that serveth Me." For the greatest jewel that we receive as God's gift is the perfect life of God's only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, who perfectly served His Father in all things, that we might reap the gracious reward.

May God therefore grant that we never seek our due reward, but His gracious gift. Amen.