

BaptistWay Bible Series for May 24: Does God really bring judgment?

May 11, 2009

Matthew recorded that Jesus stood before the religious leaders of his time, the Pharisees, and called them a “brood of vipers” for their treacherous words. “How can you, being evil, speak what is good? For the mouth speaks out of that which fills the heart” (Matthew 12:34).

We are what we speak, and when we use deceitful words, all it really does is display deceitful hearts. Jesus continued giving the Pharisees a teaching moment on the misuse of words, and the result of that misuse: “The good man brings out of his good treasure what is good; and the evil man brings out of his evil treasure what is evil. But I tell you that every careless word that people speak, they shall give an accounting for it in the day of judgment. For by your words you will be justified, and by your words you will be condemned” (Matthew 12:35-37).

Wow. Those are harsh words for the use of harsh words. Our words have consequences, and we’ll be judged for them, either positively or negatively, in an eternal way. Talk (pun intended) about a parallel to this week’s lesson. But more on that below.

Context

Our lessons last week, this week and next week from the book of Malachi focus on three of the six major questions—I prefer to call them indictments—and their responses around which the book is organized. We are focusing on the problems that continued to develop that kept the Jewish community of the latter fifth century from reaching the ideal of “restoring

the future."

The book of Malachi deals with the continuing reality of the people's failure to respond to God and live as God's covenant people. The book's six indictments are a frank discussion that highlights the lack of responsibility of the people of God for their worship practices and behavior. The indictments take the form of 13 questions posed by God and, in the fashion of a people devoid of responsibility, God doesn't receive answers, but 13 questions from the people that bear a sense of a big corporate, "Who, us?"

Likewise, this week's lesson has God bearing the fourth indictment on the people as he accuses them of "wearying" him and maligning his character with false accusations. The indictment is followed by a promise of judgment, much like we read in Matthew 12, on the people. In our lesson, we'll read about the indictment and the promise, a promise that will show God insists on faithfulness to his covenant and will take action to reinforce that insistence.

Maligning God

Before looking at our focal passage, let's peek at a section of Scripture we skipped: Malachi 2:10-17. In this passage, God delivers his third indictment on the Jews, accusing them of treachery through their treatment of each other and spiritual adultery through their treatment of him by marrying "the daughters of a foreign god" (v. 11).

It's an indictment that stabs at the moral character of the people, and one that continues in our focal passage. Look at verse 17—God indicts the Jews for accusing him of being morally bankrupt: "You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him?' In that you say, Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them,' or, 'Where is the God of justice?'" (v. 17).

We can instantly see their accusations for what they are: a perversion of

right and wrong by the Jews, as well as an example of humans passing judgment on God, both extreme sins on the heads of the people. And they are sins for which God has a word of judgment of his own.

In Malachi 3:1-5, God uses descriptive language to spell out his judgment on the disobedient people. In verse 1, God promises he will send a messenger to “clear the way before me.”

The identity of the messenger in verse 1 has been debated. The Hebrew word for “messenger” here is “malachi,” and some believe it is the author who considers himself the path-clearer. Others believe an angel or the prophet Elijah is the messenger. But three Gospels (Matthew 11:10; Mark 1:2; Luke 7:27) refer to Malachi 3:1 when introducing John the Baptist’s ministry to the world.

Regardless of the messenger’s identity, he is God’s hand of judgment on the people and his methods are meant to be brutally efficient. God likens him to a “refiner’s fire” and a “fuller’s (or laundryman’s) soap.”

Quite a word picture. A refiner typically uses intense heat to separate impurities from fine metals, and the laundry imagery brings to mind the lack of ability for germs to thrive when exposed to a caustic bar of lye soap. It’s imagery the conjures up the thought that not everything—or everyone—exposed to the messenger’s methods are going to make it through the process.

But God’s judgment in this case is not just about the process. It’s about the result. The refinement of the judgment is meant to bring righteousness (vv. 3-4) and cleansing (v. 5) of “sorcerers ... adulterers ... those who swear falsely ... those who oppress the wage earner in his wages, the widow and the orphan, and those who turn aside the alien and do not fear me.”

God cannot abide sin, and when sin is present, he must bring judgment on those living in the sin.

Although outside our focal passage, verse 6 is a great window into the nature of God and should be included for study. It's a beautiful declaration of God's preserving nature on the Jews: "For I, the Lord, do not change, therefore you, O sons of Jacob, are not consumed." It's a terse reminder that the God of justice is the only thing standing between Israel and destruction.

Questions to explore

- Is God still a God who brings judgment?
- Look at the comparison of the messenger in verse 2 to a refiner's fire or cleansing soap. What do each of these processes do?
- Malachi delivers a word of judgment on the Jews as a people. How does God deliver individual judgment on believers who sin?