



ROSE  
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CHURCH

Malachi 3:7-12  
Minor Leagues:  
Insights from the Minor Prophets  
Last And Least?

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When I was in 5<sup>th</sup> grade, an elementary school not far from the one I attended closed and merged with ours. Wilburton Elementary was closing, and some of their students came over to Woodridge Elementary School where I attended...probably other of their students went to another elementary school or two. And one of the things that some of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade kids from Wilburton liked to do at recess - and to the best of my recollection was kind of new for us at Woodridge - was to play football.

So, the first thing we'd do at recess was to divide up into teams. Two captains were selected – usually kids who actually played organized youth football – and then they would take turns picking players for their team. And you know how those things usually go: the players that are considered best usually get chosen early on, and then the players who aren't as athletic, or not as familiar with the game perhaps, are the last to be chosen. The pecking order never fluctuated much for us. For instance, even though when you look at me you might not think, “athlete” due to my height of 5’5-17/32”... ☺...I’ve always been able to overcome my vertically challenged stature and non-muscular build with other athletic abilities...so I was usually among the first 4-5 players selected. And then the kids who were chosen last were typically the same ones as well. And honestly, to this day, I can't remember names or faces of who that was...but I do remember that it was usually the same couple of kids. God bless them for sticking to it and coming out and playing in spite of what may have been a bit of a disappointing experience for them.

Maybe you had some similar kind of experience in your growing up years, whether you tended to be picked first or last or even were a captain, or were picked somewhere in the middle – whether it was for sports, or some kind of scholastic team, or a music thing, or a job...or something else. And the perception from these kinds of things is that the last are least. If you're picked last, there's a reason: you aren't perceived to be as good at football or kickball or square dancing or singing or violin-playing, whatever it is. But oftentimes (at least in our heads) we broaden that to other facets of life as

well, beyond the skill or ability for which people are being chosen and think of people as “last and least” in other ways, too.

And this morning we come to the last book of the Old Testament, and the last book in our series on the Minor Prophets, and therefore the last sermon in this series. This doesn't mean this prophet is the *least* among them, however. It isn't last because it's the least impactful or least important or least relevant. So we've gone through 11 of the Minor Prophets, and today we get to number 12, the Italian prophet: Malachi (Ma-LAH-tchee). Everybody say that with me: Malachi. Now forget the whole “Italian Prophet” thing because all of the Prophets are Jewish Israelites, and it's pronounced “Malachi.” Say that with me: “Malachi.” One more time to make sure we erase the heretical Italian pronunciation from our memories: “Malachi.” Good. If there's some kind of “name the books of the Bible quiz” when we get to heaven, and you call this “ma-LAH-tchee” God is *not* going to be happy with me. It's Malachi.

So Malachi comes last in the Minor Prophets and in the entire Old Testament, but he and his prophetic word are far from least. **In fact, out of all the prophets, Malachi's primary message may be the most obviously relevant and applicable message to Christians today.** And of course, like the rest of Scripture, sometimes Malachi's message is couched in issues of their day that were pertinent to them, but aren't so relevant for us. He preached and wrote somewhere around 450 B.C., - scholars generally give a window of 460-440 – in Jerusalem, which is in the southern kingdom of Israel. This is part way through their rebuilding efforts after the exile. They began returning to Jerusalem around 535 B.C. And by the time we get to Malachi, the Temple had been rebuilt though it was not nearly the spectacle that the previous temple had been. We know it's rebuilt because of worship practices described in Malachi. So the rebuilding of the nation of Israel has some momentum. And the message to the people is in that context, and is very pertinent to them. The context might be foreign to us; But the underlying message is very relevant. If we were to summarize Malachi in a sentence or two it would be this: **Focus on your own relationship with, and worship of, God, being particularly aware of the possibility of your own dead spirituality that can easily set in when the life of faith becomes**

## **routine.**

Listen to some of the things that God sees and speaks about through Malachi about the worship routines they're engaged in:

(Malachi 1:6-8) "A son honors his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the Lord Almighty.

"It is you priests who show contempt for my name.

"But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?'

"By offering defiled food on my altar.

"But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?'

"By saying that the Lord's table is contemptible. When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty .

**"When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the Lord. "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king..." (Malachi 1:13-14).**

Then he has a word for the Priests in particular in Malachi 2:7-8:

"For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty and people seek instruction from his mouth. But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble...."

So all kinds of things are going on in the worshipping life of Judah that are contrary to God's Word. They're going through the motions; they're "practicing their faith" but they're not taking it seriously. They're not really engaged, and are treating God, and their worship of Him like He's last and least. They're not recognizing the holiness and majesty of this God they're worshipping and not giving Him his due.

And if most of these things seem kind of foreign and irrelevant to us because we don't do animal sacrifices or offer food on an altar...and we don't do that because God has fulfilled that and provided the sacrifice through Jesus Christ...if that all sounds irrelevant to us, then listen to these words, which are our Scripture passage for the day even though we've already read other verses...because these verses probably strike a little close to home for a lot of us: **“Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. “But you ask, ‘How are we robbing you?’**

**“In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this,” says the Lord Almighty, “and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe,” says the Lord Almighty. “Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land,” says the Lord Almighty. (Malachi 3:7-12)**

What we see here is that their financial giving – which for a lot of people would have been grain offerings and animal offerings and supported the Levite priests so they could focus on leading worship and overseeing the spiritual life of the faith community...their giving fell short, along with other worship practices that reflected a “last and least” kind of mentality toward God. And as I said, we may not resonate with all of them, but we still also respond in worship each and every day in lives that are dedicated to this Holy God who loves us, and collectively as we come together each Sunday and in other settings to worship God in community. And we often still come up short, and in our own ways, we rob God also.

Now, as far as worshipping God through our financial giving: **We don't want to turn financial giving into a legalistic “have to” facet of worship. That's just as bad as withholding from God, and the Bible speaks against it.** God's desire is that we would recognize the depth of His love for us, and the extent to which He has gone to show us that love, and the extent to which He's gone to make it possible for us to be in relationship with Him, and that

we would value that and appreciate it so much that we would simply respond with heart-felt genuine acts of worship – including our financial giving as this last passage speaks to. So we want to have a proper theological understanding of why we give, and not turn it into legalism. But at the same time God has given us instructions on what is a proper worship response to Him, and why we respond that way.

There was once a man died and went to heaven. He was met at the Pearly Gates by St. Peter, who led him down the golden streets. They passed stately homes and beautiful mansions until they came to the end of the street where they stopped in front of a rundown cabin. The man asked St. Peter why he got a hut when there were so many mansions he could live in. St. Peter replied, “I did the best with the money you sent us.” That is a theologically incorrect story, and illustrates wrong motives for giving.

**Financially giving to God to support what God is doing through His Church is an act of worship.** It’s not an effort to buy our way to heaven or buy a better place there. It’s all about responding to God’s grace and cultivating in us a desire to be generous as God is generous; to recognize the importance of the gospel message and the making of disciples and shining the light of Christ in a dark world...and financially supporting what God is doing in those endeavors through the ministries of the church. And financial support is simply one way we can respond to who God is and the grace and love and mercy that He has shown us. **We give to God in other ways as well, and when we don’t give our best, we are robbing from God in those areas, too.** And we probably do so in a near-daily basis: We can rob from God theologically by describing him as less than He really is. We rob from God when we doubt His love for us or his forgiveness of us. We rob from God when we don’t obey his commands. We rob from God when we don’t love our neighbor as ourselves. We rob from God when we try and go through life, or stretches of it, without depending on Him. We rob from God when we think our happiness and comforts in life are what matter most, or that we get those things completely on our own.

And when we rob God in those ways but then praise God and act as if we’ve been living perfectly in tune with Him all week, we end up committing the same sins as the people to whom Malachi was preaching. As Isaiah writes,

and Jesus quotes, “these people honor me with their lips but their hearts are far from me” (Isaiah 29:13, Matthew 15:8). We’re just going through the motions of worship, going through the motions of faith, and living in complete oblivion to the majesty, grandeur, holiness, and power of God. **We love that Jesus is our Savior, but we’re hesitant to really let Him be our Lord.** Too often, the lives of Christians end up looking like that. And it’s not that God loves us any less for it, or that we put our salvation in jeopardy...but we miss out on the blessing of fully engaging with God and living into His will. We miss out on a life of *really* living by faith. And, maybe we end up in a shack instead of a mansion in heaven. (Just kidding.)

So: Where are you going through the motions of faith, but not really fully invested or fully giving as you could? In what ways are you and I robbing from God? **In what ways are we living as though God is last and least in our lives?** For some of us it might be financially, and we could pledge more when we fill out pledge cards in a couple months, or we could simply give more each Sunday. For some of us it might be with our time and our talents. Maybe you’ve got some ability or training or experience that could be a great blessing to the church and its ministries. Other than God himself, the greatest asset of the church is its people, and our willingness to serve God in the Church: as teachers, musicians, singers and other traditional ways of thinking of serving the church. But especially here in 21<sup>st</sup> Century America where churches are non-profit organizations trying to share the message in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there are needs for people with gifts in computer publishing, accounting, non-profit laws, personnel laws, best practices for hiring, leadership development, organizational structure issues...I mean, the list goes on. Do you know how to drive a car? Cook? Clean? Paint? Rake leaves? You can serve God! There are a myriad of ways we can give to God with our time and our talents...in addition to our tithe. Or perhaps you’re going through the motions in your understanding of God and your knowledge of His Word. I would challenge you to take a step beyond attending worship each Sunday, and participate in a class or a Bible study group here at the church (lots of things starting up next Sunday and in over the coming weeks – both Sundays and mid-week) and grow in your Biblical and theological understanding.

However exactly your faith takes shape, let's keep God at the forefront of all facets of life. Because God is not last...and He's not least. God hasn't thought that about *us* at all. It's why Jesus lived, died, and was raised from the dead: God thought so highly of you and me – the sinners that we are – that He's taken action on our behalf to show us His love and bring us into relationship with Him. You're not the last one to get selected on His team like a kid might be last to be selected for a football game at recess. God chooses all of us at the same time through the cross of Christ. So let's respond in faith that isn't "last and least" either...that isn't hollow or filled with just going through the motions; but rather, is filled with heart-felt lives of faith...heart-felt ministry endeavors in our church...that bring glory and honor to our Heavenly Father, and let's watch as God will throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out blessings upon us all. Let's pray...Amen.