

The Content and Form of Faith (homily version)
Malachi 2:17-3:7

Introduction

Many of you are aware, or soon will be, of how fastidious I am about the **format** of an exegetical paper. Of course, content is given more weight in terms of overall points for a paper. Nevertheless, the format of headings, parenthetical citations, and bibliographic entries receives more red ink than most on campus care to see. It begs the question: "What difference does it make?" "Who cares, besides the professor, and why is it important." Of course, such concerns raise the larger issue of why any rules, forms, or traditions are important. Why do the English teachers insist that our subjects and verbs must match in number? Why did my parents instill in me the protocol of referring to men as "Mister" and women as "Mrs." or "Miss"? Why should we stop at red lights even when there are no other cars at the intersection? Why do we rehearse the same old scene of the Last Supper when taking communion at church?

Of course, there are a number of significant reasons why the **forms** of our society are important. Written and oral communication would break down without some accepted guidelines. Chaos could develop without obedience to civic laws. Important memories and foundational beliefs may be lost if we do not rehearse them. Among the responses to the question of rules and traditions, must be included the concern for demonstrating reverence and devotion! Sometimes, we are called to actions and behaviors whose primary purpose is to confer respect to others. The prophet Malachi addresses such a call in relation to God. In preparation for the Lord's return, the prophet announces that a messenger of the Lord will come to judge unfaithfulness, and to re-instill honor and respect for the Lord. I invite you to open your Bibles and turn with me to this oracle in Malachi (last book in OT).

[Read Malachi 2:17-3:7]

The Promise of God's Coming

Each of the six oracles in Malachi begins with a declaration from the prophet, followed by a statement of rebuttal inserted in the mouth of the audience. This statement of rebuttal is typically introduced with the phrase, "yet **you** say ..."

This pattern is evident in the passage which we just read. The prophet declares, "You have wearied the Lord with your words." Then the prophet recounts the audience's rebuttal, "Yet **you** say, '**How** have we wearied him?'" In response, the prophet explains that the children of Israel have wearied God by complaining that evildoers are considered good in God's sight, and that the Lord even delights in them! Furthermore, they complain that God's justice is absent.

The complaint from the children of Israel reflects the frustration and depression of the postexilic period. Recall that, Babylon had overthrown Jerusalem, destroyed the temple, and taken the people of Judah into exile. Later, Persia overthrew Babylon, and the people of Judah were allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. All of this was explained by the prophets as the result of God's punishment for sin, and God's subsequent promise of restoration. In relation to the promise of restoration, the prophets had announced that God would return to the temple (e.g., Ezek. 43:2-5; Hag. 2:7; Zech. 8:3). This re-appearance of God's presence at the temple was to be accompanied by justice for the righteous, and judgment against the wicked (cf. Zeph. 2:8-10; Joel 3:16-21).

In the postexilic period of Malachi's day, after the temple had been rebuilt and sacrifices had resumed, the people of Judah were complaining that they did not see evidence of God having returned to the temple. This was because they witnessed that good people suffered, while wicked people prospered. Thus, they cried out, "Where is the God of justice?" as we read in Malachi 2:17. In response to this cry, the prophet announced that the Lord will come suddenly to his temple, and a messenger will prepare the way before Him.

The postexilic community of Judah was experiencing a type of "in-between" time. They knew that God had been in His temple in previous days. Now, after the punishment of exile, and after the temple had been rebuilt, they were still waiting for God's return, as promised by the prophets.

It is this longing which characterizes our own season of advent. We too find ourselves in a type of "in-between" time. We believe that Christ came as a child, and walked the earth, and suffered and died on our behalf, hundreds of years ago. Nevertheless, we await his return as promised in the Scriptures. Like the postexilic community, our anticipation is often overshadowed with depression and frustration. We too, see wickedness prosper, and the suffering of the innocent. We too, wish for the appearance of the God of justice who will set things right and establish his eternal kingdom!

Judgment Against Unfaithfulness

The direct response to the complaint of the postexilic community is found in verse 5, of Malachi 3. God proclaims through Malachi, that the Lord will draw near for judgment against sorcerers; adulterers; those who swear falsely; those who oppress hired workers, the widow, and the orphan; those who thrust aside the alien; and those who do not fear God. This is the justice which the children of Israel anticipated, and for which they had cried out. This is the result of the coming of the Lord to his temple, and the action of setting straight that which is wrong in the world.

Christians today long for the same kind of vindication; anxiously awaiting the return of the Lord, and the establishment of justice and righteousness, along with judgment against evil. Such an announcement from Malachi was surely welcomed by the postexilic community. Like a classic prophet, however, Malachi drives the announcement to the point of conviction. He turns the judgment on **all** the children of Israel, stating in verse 7, "**you** have turned aside from my statutes and not kept them."

Thus, the justice and judgment of God serves to bring conviction and calls for repentance, as the prophet proclaims, "return to me and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts." Verses 5-7 of Malachi 3 reflect the foundational **content** of prophetic literature; that is, the announcement of judgment against sin, culminating with a call to repentance. The condemnation of idolatry, apostasy, oppression, and injustice as reflected here are classic prophetic themes, especially evident within the oracles of the 8th century prophets of ancient Israel.

The call for righteous living was so strong that it sounded as if the 8th century prophets rejected the **forms** of the sacrificial system. Isaiah, Amos, Micah, and Hosea each communicate God's disdain for the offerings of bulls and goats, the trampling of his courts in the temple, the celebration of festivals, and the sound of worship music. This contempt for the **forms** of temple worship is not because they were being done incorrectly, but because they were followed by daily living which reflected wickedness and sin.

The prophets implied that performing a perfect sacrifice and then going forth to rob a widow of her land or cheat someone in the marketplace, resulted in the nullification and rejection of that sacrifice. Thus, the **content** of faith, reflected in love of God and neighbor, served to either affirm or deny the validity of the **form** of faith, reflected in the practices of worship.

The temptation is to think that as long as our thoughts and actions are righteous, then it is no longer important whether we accommodate the rules and regulations of our faith. After all, we know all too well that **legalistic** attitudes only lead to exclusivism, arrogance, and self-righteousness. Consequently, we tend to turn to the other extreme by neglecting commandments and traditions. The danger at this end of the spectrum is **losing reverence** and **respect** for God. Somehow, the postexilic community of ancient Israel seems to have fallen into this danger. Part of Malachi's message in preparation for the coming of the Lord to the temple, addresses this need to purify the **forms** of worship.

Purification of Worship

Verses 2-4 of chapter three, do not speak directly to the kind of judgment and justice for which the people of Judah were crying out. Furthermore, verses 2-4 do not conform to the classic prophetic theme reflected in the following verses. In these central words of our oracle, Malachi proclaims that God's messenger will purify and refine the descendants of Levi, and the offering of Judah and Jerusalem.

Like a refiner's fire and a fullers' soap, the messenger of the Lord will cleanse the worship of the children of Israel. The concern expressed in verses 3 and 4 seems to be for right sacrifices and offerings which are pleasing to the Lord. To better understand the problem which led to this concern, it is helpful to look back to an earlier oracle in the book of Malachi. The oracle in Malachi 1:6-14 judges the priests for offering polluted sacrifices to the Lord. They are accused of bringing blemished, blind, lame, and sick animals for sacrifice.

The complaint expressed by the prophet here is not like that of the 8th century prophets who were concerned about the hypocrisy of offering proper sacrifices followed by wicked living. This new complaint is that the **form** of the sacrifices is not in compliance with the regulations which God stipulated in the law. It should be emphasized that God is not advocating that his children should return to legalistic and hypocritical bondage to rules and regulations regarding ritual. Rather, there is another issue which is at stake here. The neglect, and even rebellion, reflected in relation to the legislation regarding ritual demonstrates a **lack of reverence for God.**

The earlier oracle in **Malachi 1**, concerning the pollution of the sacrificial system, clearly casts this problem in terms of a lack of respect for the Lord. The oracle begins in verse 6, with the inquiry from the Lord, "where is the honor due me," and "where is the respect due me?" In verse 11, the disrespect from the children of Israel is contrasted with the greatness of God's name among the nations **who do** offer incense and a **pure** offering. This contrast is repeated in verse 14 in which the Lord proclaims that His name is revered among the nations, while Israel sacrifices what is blemished to the Lord.

I have to admit that this focus on the **form** of ritual is a little disturbing. I understand when the Scripture stresses my need to check the motives of my heart and the actions of my life. But, I am a little uncomfortable when it is concerned about whether I satisfy an accepted rule, or ritual, or tradition. I prefer to relax about whether I should dress up for a church gathering, or work on the clarity of my speech, or prepare an inspiring order of worship for church. After all, what really matters is that my heart is in the right place, and I make people comfortable. Such consolation, however, is disrupted by texts such as this one in Malachi.

In fact, Malachi is not the only text which promotes such discomfort by emphasizing the form and regulations related to a relationship with God. Recall, in I Samuel, the story of when some individuals from Beth-shemesh peaked into the ark of God, and God struck dead 50,070 of the people. Later, in II Samuel, recall when Uzzah tried to steady the ark of the covenant from falling off a cart, and the Lord struck him dead for touching the holy object. Also, in the book of Numbers, there is the account of when Moses dishonored God when he struck the rock, and the Lord banned him from ever entering the promised land.

Such accounts are most disturbing. Surely the people of Beth-shemesh did not mean to offend God. Did they really deserve to experience such devastation? Surely Uzzah's heart was in the right place when he tried to save the ark from falling. Did he really deserve to be struck down? Given all the stress and hardship which Moses endured with such a stubborn people, surely he was worthy of one little moment of weakness. Did he really deserve to be restricted from ever entering the promised land to which he worked so diligently to lead the children of Israel?

In each of these cases, as with Malachi, the dominant concern is respect for God! The text makes clear, that the Lord calls for honor and reverence before Him!

Conclusion

In the season of advent, we anticipate the promised coming of the Lord. We celebrate his coming to restore justice and establish his kingdom. Our anticipation is tempered with conviction which calls for repentance from our sins. These are the familiar preparations for advent.

Malachi seems to add a new dimension to our advent preparation. He proclaims that the messenger of the Lord will prepare His way through refinement and purification which is grounded in honoring God. It is apparent, that the message in Malachi calls us to honor God with our best. Rather, than just getting by with only what is acceptable, we must push ourselves to honor God in all we do. It is not a matter of becoming a perfectionist, and it is not a reversion to legalism. Rather, it is a genuine call to step-up, to reverencing God in all we do and say.

We must examine ourselves. Rather than being influenced by our selfish desires, or the pressures of our peers, or the relaxed expectations of contemporary society; we must make decisions based on what honors God. This may impact the clothes we wear, the words we speak, the work we accomplish, and the way we worship. May the Spirit of God inspire and direct our path, and may we bring honor to God in all things.

Benediction: May the words of our mouths, the meditations of our hearts, and the obedience of our hands be acceptable in thy sight O Lord, our strength, and our redeemer.