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Homiletics

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A Spiritual Checkup

Malachi 3:13 - 4:3

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Proposition: God gives a diagnosis to the wicked in order to warn them and prognosis to the righteous in order to encourage them.

- I. God's diagnosis for the wicked
 - A. The Lord accuses the people
 - B. The people request the details
 - C. The Lord proves the accusation

- II. God's prognosis for the righteous
 - A. They will be mine - a treasured possession
 - B. They will be spared
 - C. The wicked:
 - 1. will be punished
 - 2. yet have a remedy - be like the righteous
 - D. The righteous will be healthy, happy, and prosperous

Intro:

She could have been waiting in a hospital or a doctor's office. Instead, she was waiting in her home near the telephone. The tension in the air was as thick as a dense fog. The members of the family were doing their best to do their normal activities but they all seemed distracted. The minutes went by but still the phone did not ring. All of her medical tests had been completed and the only thing that remained was for the doctors to examine the results and to make the diagnosis or determination of what was wrong with her. Once the diagnosis was made a prognosis or prediction could be made as to what she could expect to happen to her in the future. Then, hopefully, a cure could be offered. But for now all she could do was to wait. So she waited... Finally the phone rang! Hesitantly yet anxiously she answered the phone. Yes, it was the doctor and yes, he did have a diagnosis. The waiting was over and the news came: my mother had peripheral neuropathy which was the result of temporary damage to the nerves as a complication of her diabetes. There was no arguing with the diagnosis. The doctors had done many tests including an EMG (or Electro Mylo Gram) and the results were classic for someone with the disease. The prognosis came too and it was not very happy: about 6 months of pain and numbness running along her nerves from her back down her right leg could be expected. The remedy? Just time and anything that might help reduce the pain including hot or cold compresses, bed rest and as little physical activity as possible. And with time my mom did get better and today she is just about as healthy as she always was, praise be to God!

We trust the doctors who examine us when we have a physical problem because we trust that they have the training and the objectivity to examine the results of tests and to come to an accurate diagnosis. This does not always happen due to limited knowledge and simple human error (just as in all human endeavors) but when it comes to spiritual examinations, God can be fully trusted to give us both an accurate diagnosis and prognosis for our spiritual situation. In our passage this morning, God gives a diagnosis to the wicked in order to warn them and a prognosis to the righteous in order to encourage them.

Please turn with me to Malachi 3:13 - 4:3 (the very last book in the OT and right before Matthew).

As in the medical world, if there is a problem in the spiritual realm of life then an accurate diagnosis must be the first step in solving it. Thus, the first thing that we see in this passage is God's diagnosis for the wicked.

In verse 13, the LORD simply states his diagnosis of the spiritual condition of the people. He says, "You have said harsh things against me" or more literally, "Your words have been strong against me." The idea is not that their words have hurt God's feelings but it is as if their words had been in a struggle with God and that their words had prevailed against him. The people were not merely being cruel or unkind to God. Their words were so strong, so potent, so forceful that God considered them to be almost violent as they were spoken against him. Their words were not weak; they were not ineffective; they were successful in attacking him and this passage is God's response to them. Faced with God's accusation, the people respond with the natural question, "What have we said against you?" As a parent who is asked by a child accused of wrong-doing must answer the question, "What did I do wrong?" so God answers the people. Their question demands a specific example of the wrong-doing in order to prove the accusation. Thus the Lord proceeds to describe the errant behavior of his children: God says, for one thing, that the people have said that it is futile to serve God (vs 14). What an outrageous claim for a people whom God calls his own to make! His own chosen people said that it was of no real value, that it was fruitless and useless to serve the God of their fathers! And they knew who they were talking to—they used his personal name "YHWH" to refer to him yet in their own agenda, according to their own priorities, serving God did not rank #1. It didn't even rank #2 or #3! In fact, they considered serving God as of NO importance whatsoever!

The rest of the verse further reveals their attitude toward God when they ask, "What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?" They were thinking about gain, about profit. What immediate benefits could they derive for themselves by serving God? They just couldn't see any! If they were alive today they might have asked, "What's in it for me?!" The people seem to have been saying, "Look, we tried serving God for awhile and things just didn't turn out like we thought they should so now we are giving it up as useless." What they did in terms of the service of God was motivated by a desire for immediate gain; to receive an immediate reward from God in exchange for their service. What

did they hope to receive? The people expected that God would bring prosperity and happiness to them now that they were returning to their land after being conquered and sent into captivity by the Babylonians.

A number of years earlier Judah had been defeated by Nebuchadnezzar and the Babylonians. Many of the people who survived the war and the famine and disease which naturally accompanied it were deported to Babylon (597, 587, and 582 BC). However, in 516 BC Zerubbabel and those who worked with him succeeded in rebuilding the temple in Jerusalem that had been destroyed. Another wave of returning exiles under the leadership of Nehemiah succeeded in rebuilding the walls around Jerusalem in 445 BC. Under the influence of Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor, worship in the temple and other religious activities were once again encouraged. However, by 433 BC the tithe was already being ignored, the Sabbath was being broken, there was intermarriage with the foreigners in the land, and the priests had become corrupt. The people had returned to their land and had begun to expect immediate blessing and the return of its power and significance among the governments of the world. As the people came back from the Babylonian exile to Judah and Jerusalem they no doubt heard the glorious promises of the prophets ringing in their ears: For example, the prophet Amos had spoken of a time after the exile when God would restore the fortunes of his people Israel and that they would rebuild the ruined cities and live in them and that there would be an abundance of produce from the land. But this did not happen as immediately as the people had hoped and expected. They were still an insignificant and struggling province on the outer reaches of the great Persian Empire. As a result they became impatient. They lost their hope and they began to question whether God could be trusted or not. They began to ask the age old question, “Why do the evil doers around us prosper?” The people could not see the benefits of serving God. If they could not acquire what they wanted by serving God, then perhaps they could find another way. As they looked around them they saw that those who were proud and arrogant were getting what they wanted, they were prospering and flourishing according to verse 15. Thus, they began to call the arrogant blessed. Those who were contemptuously self-assured were looked at as worthy of imitation. Those who were presumptuous and lacking respect for God were viewed as people to envy and they desired to be like them. Was there no concern for God here? How could they desire to be like such people?! The last part of verse 15 tells us the answer. What they saw as

they looked around them was that the evildoers were prospering and even those who challenged God were escaping any punishment. People were getting away with evil and God wasn't doing anything about it!

The strong words spoken by the people against God actually amounted to a challenge to his justice and fairness. They were not the first and they were not the last. In Psalm 73 we find that Asaph experienced the same struggles. He said, "I envied the arrogant when I saw the prosperity of the wicked. They have no struggles; their bodies are healthy and strong. They are free from the burdens common to man; they are not plagued by human ills... This is what the wicked are like -- always carefree, they increase in wealth." Not only did Asaph and the people that Malachi was writing about feel this way but maybe you also feel this way this morning. Maybe you too are tempted to call the arrogant and the who-do-evil blessed as they seem to be prospering. In my experience it is not uncommon to catch people telling lies in the business world. Some people seem to think that it is OK to lie in order to make a sale. Where I work we rely on companies to supply us with computers and parts that we need to sell to our customers. At times it seems as if they lie to us when they tell us that they have the parts and can ship them immediately in order to get the sale. Then we have to wait weeks for the parts while they try to find a source for them after we have already placed the order. It seems that these types of tactics work because the companies end up making lots of money. It is easy to feel tempted to do the same things because even though it is wrong it seems to work well for them. Yet we must not succumb to the temptation because the important word to emphasis in the success of those who do evil is that they only SEEM to be prospering. Their success is only temporary.

To make this clear, the scene depicted by our passage now shifts in verse 16 from a description of the spiritual condition of the wicked to a description of what will happen to the righteous. Thus, we have seen first, God's diagnosis for the wicked and now, secondly, we are presented with God's prognosis for the righteous. Again, in verse 16 as in verse 13 we see a group of people who are speaking. Yet, these people are described as those who fear the LORD and are contrasted with those who do evil. It is the fear of the Lord which characterizes the lives of the people in this section. What does it mean to fear the LORD? It does not mean to be held paralyzed by terror so that you become so afraid of angering God that you cannot move nor do

anything. Yet, it seems to mean more than just having respect for him. There is such a thing as a healthy fear. A sailor might be said to have a healthy fear of the ocean as he has come to know the power that it has to destroy and kill. This is more than respect. It is a fear that does not keep him from sailing yet it does keep him from being too presumptuous and too careless. This type of healthy fear leads to practical action. So it is with the fear of the LORD. Psalm 111:10 as well as Proverbs 9:10 both say that the “Fear of the LORD is the beginning of Wisdom.” Why is that? Because if you fear the LORD you will not act presumptuously and you will consider what the LORD might want you to do. You will not be your own judge of what is right or wrong but you will try to see it from the LORD’s perspective. One of the approaches to ethics (or how to know what is right from what is wrong) that I learned when I was in grade school through high school is called Situational Ethics. This approach to right and wrong teaches that there is no absolute right or wrong. It all depends on the situation and therefore is relative not absolute. What is wrong in one situation might be right in another. This approach, I believe, is very dangerous. It does not correspond well with fearing the LORD because it fails to consider that from God’s perspective there are absolute right and wrongs. For instance, Leviticus 19:14 says, “Do not curse the deaf or put a stumbling block in front of the blind, but fear your God.” Perhaps there are none that would claim that it would ever be right to put a stumbling block in front of someone who is blind but that is precisely the point. Some things are always wrong and some things are always right. It is also interesting to note before the king could not sleep; so he orders that the book of memorable deeds be brought in and read to him. It was found recorded there that Mordecai had once saved the king’s life. As a result the king decides to honor Mordecai and eventually Haman gets hung by the command of the king on the very gallows that he built for Mordecai! The important thing to notice is that a book or scroll of memorable deeds had been kept for the king. That is exactly what seems to be going on in our passage. It is a remarkable image that depicts God as having a scroll of remembrance written concerning those who feared him. They will surely be remembered and rewarded.

They will also be established in a very special relationship to the LORD. In verse 17 the LORD Almighty says, “They will be mine in the day when I make them my treasured possession!” The word for treasured or special possession only occurs in the OT 8 times. The first place it occurs is in Exodus 19:5-6 when the people of Israel were gathered before Mount Sinai just before the 10

Commandments were given. God said, “If you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” This wonderful prediction is fulfilled in the NT by the body of Christ, the Church! Those of us who have entered into a new relationship with God by being born again through Jesus Christ are the ones who are referred to in our passage in Malachi this morning! We are God’s special, treasured possession! We belong to God and if God is for us then who can be against us!

In verse 18 God promises that there will come a time when it will be very easy to distinguish between the righteous and the wicked, in other words, between those who serve God and those who do not. Though the wicked might be allowed to temporarily prosper in this life, there will come a time when God will carry out justice; his fairness will be no longer in doubt. When we are tempted to call the proud blessed we must remember that their final destiny will not be and that is what counts the most. It is not “He who has the most toys wins” but “He who has the Son wins!” As verses 19 and 4:3 tell us that that which is evil will be destroyed yet verse 17 says that we who are God’s special possession will be spared. There WILL come a time when God will cause the righteous to be victorious over evil. For that reason we must not lose hope and we must not become impatient. It is not in vain that we serve the LORD Almighty; it is not futile that we fear the LORD.

Conclusion:

Are you struggling this morning over whether to be honest in business or school because you have seen that those who have not been honest seem to prosper? Do not be deceived! The Day of Judgment has not yet come but when it does you will not want to be found in the company of the wicked! If you have succumbed to the temptation to imitate the wicked, do not lose heart. There is still time to remedy the situation. If you find yourself in need of a cure for a spiritual ailment then come to God in repentance through Christ not as one who is proud and presumptuous but as one who fears the LORD. Turn from your sin to a forgiving God.

Verse 4:2 talks about the wonderful destiny of those who fear the LORD. The beautiful imagery depicts righteousness rising like the morning sun after a long, dark night. It will triumph over the

darkness as it rises never to set again! Righteousness will have a final and complete victory over evil. It will have healing in its wings. Revelation 21:4 says that there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain! Like calves that have been released from their stalls, verse 4:2 says, so will those who fear the LORD go out and leap about. The picture is one of perfect happiness, health, and divine riches which will be ours when we enter into God's glorious presence at the consummation of all things. All of this is not to say, of course, that God is not concerned with you in your present situation. In fact, God can and often does bring justice on an individual basis. That should still be hoped and prayed for. Yet, the point of this passage is simply this: that God's justice will one day be fully and completely vindicated as the wicked are forever punished and the righteous are forever rewarded. Therefore, trust in the justice of the LORD and walk in fear before him knowing what a fantastic destiny we have to look forward to!! AMEN!!