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October 7th: Malachi 3 & Matthew 25:31-46

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The Lord coming to his temple. The Parable of the Sheep and the Goats.

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Transcript

Malachi chapter 3. 1. And do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts. 2. For I the Lord do not change. Therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.

3. From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes, and have not kept them. 4. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts. 5. But you say, How shall we return? 6. Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me.

7. But you say, How have we robbed you? 8. In your tithes and contributions, you are cursed with a curse. 9. For you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. 10.

Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. 11. And thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts.

12. If I will not open the windows of heaven for you, and pour down for you a blessing, until there is no more need, I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the Lord of hosts. 13.

Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the Lord of hosts. 14. Your words have been hard against me, says the Lord.

15. But you say, How have we spoken against you? 16. You have said, It is vain to serve God.

17. What is the profit of our keeping his charge, or of walking as in mourning before the Lord of hosts? 18. And now we call the arrogant blessed.

19. Evil doers not only prosper, but they put God to the test, and they escape. 20.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke with one another. The Lord paid attention and heard them. 21.

And a book of remembrance was written before him of those who feared the Lord and esteemed his name. 22. They shall be mine, says the Lord of hosts, in the day when I make up my treasured possession, and I will spare them as a man spares his son who serves him.

23. Then once more you shall see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve him. A fourth dispute in the book of Malachi was introduced at the end of chapter 2 in verse 17.

You have wearied the Lord with your words, but you say, How have we wearied him? By saying, Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. Or by asking, Where is the God of justice? This dispute continues here in chapter 3. In the preceding chapter the Lord rebuked and condemned the Levitical priests for their failure to maintain true worship. The task of a faithful priest was described in chapter 2 verse 7. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth.

For he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. The language of the messenger is taken up again at the beginning of this chapter as the Lord announces the coming of an eschatological messenger. In the second half of the preceding chapter the people's faithlessness was also central.

They were condemned for their unfaithfulness to their brethren, their unfaithfulness to the Lord in intermarriage with idolaters, and their unfaithfulness to their wives. While there are distinct disputes, we should not think that they are simply detached from each other. The issue of the people's faithlessness continues to be prominent in the opening verses of chapter 3, where the Lord's coming will purge the people and their worship.

The people are warned in advance, so that they will be prepared when he comes. A turn to faithfulness in the present should be motivated by the expected advent of the Lord in judgment and purification. The challenge of the verse with which the chapter opens, as

Ray Clendenden observes, is that of determining the identity of the different figures that are involved.

There is the I who is speaking, the one of whom he speaks as my messenger, the Lord whom you seek, and then also the messenger of the covenant. How many figures are actually here? We should recognize, for instance, that the first occurrence of the word LORD within this verse is not a translation of the word Yahweh, as it is at the end of the verse. In many biblical translations this will be revealed in the fact that one has all caps and the other does not.

However, the identity of this figure can be narrowed down by the fact that it says that he is coming to his temple. It would seem that this character is none other than the Lord himself. Presumably there is at least a distinction here between the Lord who comes suddenly to his temple and the messenger who was sent to prepare the way.

Is the messenger of the covenant the same figure as the messenger that is sent to prepare the way? It would seem more likely that the messenger of the covenant is associated with the Lord whom you seek. The messenger of the covenant is described as one in whom they delight, which would naturally connect him with the Lord whom you seek. We might also read the expression as, And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple, yea, the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight.

The messenger of the covenant in whom you delight is another way of saying the Lord whom you seek. However, there seems to be a problem here. The Lord is the one who is speaking, but he seems to speak of a different figure, the messenger of the covenant, who seems in the context to be paralleled with the Lord whom you seek.

Is the Lord speaking of himself in the third person and also describing himself as the messenger of the covenant? Or is something else going on here? There are other Old Testament verses that might give some clue. In Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3, A voice cries, In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. In Exodus chapter 23 verses 20 to 21, The Lord speaks of his preparation of the way for his people to the promised land.

Behold, I send an angel before you to guard you on the way and to bring you to the place that I have prepared. Pay careful attention to him and obey his voice. Do not rebel against him, for he will not pardon your transgression, for my name is in him.

In the next chapter in Malachi, verses 5 to 6, The Lord also speaks of the way that he is going to send a messenger in advance, Elijah the prophet. Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes, and he will turn the hearts of fathers to their children and the hearts of children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the land with a decree of utter destruction. These statements are taken up within the New Testament where they are related to John the Baptist and to Jesus.

Mark chapter 1 verses 2 to 3, As it is written in Isaiah the prophet, This takes Malachi chapter 3 verse 1, Isaiah chapter 40 verse 3 and Exodus chapter 23 verse 20 and remixes them into a single statement of the Lord's advent that is being announced by John the Baptist. That advent is coming in Jesus Christ. This reading is strengthened by other verses, Luke chapter 1 verse 76, And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High, for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

That's Zacharias speaking about his son John the Baptist. John speaks of himself in John chapter 3 verse 28, Putting all of these pieces together we can perhaps come to a greater understanding of what this opening verse means. John the Baptist is the messenger that is sent in advance to prepare the people.

The Lord whom you seek, certainly taken by itself, might be a possible reference to a messianic figure. The fact that he comes to his temple suggests that he is divine. He, I think, is identified with the messenger of the covenant in what follows.

Understanding this figure as Christ helps us to put together the pieces. Christ is like the angel of the Lord who leads the people through the wilderness. He is fully divine, but he is also the one sent by God.

As the messenger of the covenant, he is the archetypal prophet, the word of the Lord himself incarnate. In light of verse 7 of the preceding chapter, we should also see him as the archetypal priest. We shouldn't miss the element of sarcasm within this opening statement.

This statement is, among other things, an answer to the people's charge. Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them. And their challenge, where is the God of justice? Both of which are mentioned in the preceding verse at the end of chapter 2. The Lord is saying in response, so you really delight in justice? Well that justice that you are so seeking, that justice that you supposedly delight in, is about to come.

But you're not going to be ready for it. When the Lord, the messenger of the covenant, comes to his temple, his holiness will be like a consuming fire, and no one will be able to stand before him. The unfaithfulness of the priest, challenged in the preceding chapter, would be dealt with by his presence.

He would purify the sons of Levi, and refine them like gold and silver. While the priest's blessings were currently being treated as if they were curses, and their offerings were not being accepted, the purifying of the sons of Levi would lead to pure offerings being made. Once more the sacrifices of the people would be accepted before the Lord.

The once broken covenant relationship would be fully restored. These verses are also alluded to within the New Testament, by John the Baptist who says in Matthew chapter 3

verses 11-12, The cleansing fire might be taken from these verses in Malachi. We should note that the threshing floor was the site where the temple was built.

The clearing of the threshing floor is paralleled with the cleansing of the house. The coming of the Lord would lead to swift judgement against the evil doers in the land, sorcerers, adulterers, those who swear falsely, those who oppress the poor and the weak and the vulnerable, those who do not show hospitality to the stranger, and more generally, those who do not fear the Lord. The people have been complaining that the Lord's justice is not being enacted, and yet they are not seeing the Lord's justice because they are being spared it.

Were the Lord's justice to come at that moment, they would all be consumed by it. Their challenge, where is the God of justice, was a direct attack upon the nature of God, presenting the Lord as if he were fundamentally inconsistent or unreliable. Yet the truth of the matter is, that it is God's unchangeable commitment to his people that has meant that they are not consumed, that his justice has not come near when its coming would mean their destruction.

The Lord by his nature does not change, yet the only consistency in the people themselves is their fickleness. They have been turning aside all the time since the days of their fathers. The dispute between the Lord and his people continues in the second half of verse 7. He calls them to return to him in repentance, and yet they ask, what need they repent for? They have, he responds, been robbing him, a charge that they immediately question.

Despite their denials, the charge has substance. They have not been bringing their tithes and contributions, much as the blessings of the priests were turned into curses. So the people, for their failure to give to the Lord what was his due, were suffering under the covenant curse of futility.

Until they remedied their failure to pay the tithes, they would not enter into the full enjoyment of the covenant blessing. Yet if they paid the tithes as they ought to, the Lord promises them the most dramatic covenant blessing. I will open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need.

All of the covenant blessings are there to be enjoyed, if only they will return to the Lord. The Lord is not withholding the blessings from them, out of some malicious desire that they not enjoy them. It is the Lord's will, indeed, it will be his purpose that they enjoy the blessings.

But their grasping refusal to give back to the Lord tokens of the good gifts that he has given to them, is preventing them from entering into the full enjoyment of the blessings that he has for them. The people's questioning of the Lord's justice is brought up again in verse 13 and following. They had questioned whether it was worth living righteously at

all, since evil doers seemed to prosper and be blessed by him.

We might here recognise something of the struggle that the psalmist experienced in Psalm 73 verses 13-18. All in vain have I kept my heart clean and washed my hands in innocence. For all the day long I have been stricken and rebuked every morning.

If I had said I will speak thus, I would have betrayed the generation of your children. But when I thought how to understand this, it seemed to me a wearisome task. Until I went into the sanctuary of God, then I discerned their end.

Truly you set them in slippery places, you make them fall to ruin. The psalmist, through his reflections in the house of the Lord, was able to discern the truth of the matter. However, the response of the people here was far more cynical.

They fell into the trap that the psalmist narrowly avoided. However, Malachi's message does not seem to have fallen upon entirely deaf ears. Some people did respond.

In verse 16 we read of some who feared the Lord, the Lord paying attention and hearing them in response. This can be seen as a natural fulfilment of his promise, return to me and I will return to you. The book of remembrance that was written was probably not a book that was written by or for the Lord, so much as for the people to be placed before the Lord.

Perhaps some sort of covenant renewal document. Not a book of remembrance of them, as many translations have it, but a book of remembrance for them. The Lord assures them that on the day of his visitation, they would be honoured as his treasured possession.

At that moment in time, the difference between the righteous and the wicked may not be obvious, but those who live by faith would see clearly on that day the distinction between these two groups. A question to consider. The word messenger is an important one within the book of Malachi.

Malachi's own name means my messenger. In chapter 2 verse 7 the faithful priest is described as the messenger of the Lord of hosts. And in verse 1 of this chapter, if our reading is correct, we have two messengers.

The messenger who prepares the way, and the messenger of the covenant, who is the Lord who comes to his temple. Taking these various references together, how might we come to a fuller understanding of what the figure of the messenger represents, and what his task is? Matthew chapter 25 verses 31 to 46 The Lord will separate people from one another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. And he will place the sheep on his right, but the goats on the left.

Then the king will say to those on his right, Come, you who are blessed by my father,

inherit the kingdom prepared for you from the foundation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you clothed me, I was sick and you visited me, I was in prison and you came to me. Then the righteous will answer him saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you, or thirsty and give you a drink? And when did we see you a stranger and welcome you, or naked and clothe you? And when did we see you sick or in prison and visit you? And the king will answer them, Truly I say to you, as you did it to one of the least of these my brothers, you did it to me.

Then he will say to those on his left, Depart from me, you cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry and you gave me no food, I was thirsty and you gave me no drink, I was a stranger and you did not welcome me, naked and you did not clothe me, sick and in prison, and you did not visit me. Then they will answer, saying, Lord, when did we see you hungry or thirsty or a stranger or naked or sick or in prison and did not minister to you? Then he will answer them, saying, Truly I say to you, as you did not do it to one of the least of these, you did not do it to me.

And these will go away into eternal punishment, but the righteous into eternal life. Along with the parable of the wheat and the tares and the parable of the dragnet, the parable of the sheep and the goats that ends chapter 25 of Matthew is one of the great separation parables of Jesus' ministry. Arrayed before the exalted and enthroned Son of Man is a great judgement scene.

The nation is being divided by the king as a shepherd divides the flock between sheep and goats. Sheep being sent to the right, the place of blessing, and the goats to the left. Now while this is commonly described as the parable of the sheep and the goats, that analogy isn't really explored within it.

It's just an introductory metaphor perhaps. And what we're focusing upon is more a judgement scene that is less of a parable than a straightforward description such as we have in Matthew 7 concerning those who say Lord, Lord, etc. Despite being very familiar, this parable does raise a number of questions.

Perhaps one of the most obvious ones concerns its relationship with the rest of the material of the Olivet Discourse. While it occurs at the very end and the climax of the Olivet Discourse in Matthew, where Jesus is speaking about coming judgement upon Jerusalem and the coming of the Son of Man in judgement in AD 70, it does seem difficult to fit into that limited frame. A number of commentators have maintained that there is some sort of temporal hiatus or break located at a point between the earlier part of the Discourse and the later.

So the former part deals with the events of AD 70 and then the later part with the end of all things. Arguments for this have sometimes appealed to the idea of eschatological telescoping. So when you have a telescope you can pull it out and then you can bring it

back in.

And there's a way in which future events foretold by prophets can correspond to each other with earlier events anticipating far greater later events. Now this is something that we see in the prophets concerning, for instance, prophecies of a new covenant. At certain points those prophecies seem to have an original referent to the return from exile.

And so that's the new covenant. But there's clearly a greater new covenant brought in by Christ. And so there's looking forward beyond that original event foretold by the prophet to something greater that fulfils that even more.

You can think about the same thing with the way the Exodus plays out. There's an original Exodus event but that Exodus anticipates a greater Exodus. And at certain points we see some of these prophecies that have elements that do not seem to rest finally upon their initial referent.

They seem to point beyond it to anticipate something even greater. Perhaps such prophecies could be thought of as great clouds of promise from which an initial shower comes but they do not yet fully discharge themselves of the full weight of the rain of blessing that they have to give that awaits something more. And here I think we might encounter one such occasion.

This parable or this discourse refers to AD 70 and the events immediately after that but it also looks forward to something greater and I think something that is at the very end of all things. A second question concerning this concerns the identity of the least of these to whom Jesus refers. And many people are divided between a universalist and a particularist reading of this expression.

So universalist readings find in the least of these a reference to the poor more generally. So Benedict XVI for instance wrote that Jesus identifies himself with those in need, with the hungry, the thirsty, the stranger, the naked, the sick and those in prison. Love of God and love of neighbour have become one.

In the least of the brethren we find Jesus himself and in Jesus we find God. Now this is a reading that has a long history within the Church. A reading that is honoured in part by the fruit that it has borne.

It's something that has inspired and encouraged many people to remarkable practices of the works of mercy. And so particularist readings by contrast tend to see in the least of Jesus' brethren a reference to the disciples and the emissaries of Christ. They're the ones that Christ has sent out as his missionaries, as those who bring his name to different places.

But this reading seems to undercut the support the passage has traditionally been seen

to give to the Church's ministry to the poor and particular identification with and concern for the poor. Now I think the particularist reading is the right one. The reference to Jesus' brethren in the context of Matthew's Gospel is most likely to refer to disciples or to people who respond positively to the Gospel.

Jesus has already spoken in this book of his identification with the disciples that he sent out. In chapter 10 verses 40 to 42 Whoever receives you receives me, and whoever receives me receives him who sent me. The one who receives a prophet because he is a prophet will receive a prophet's reward, and the one who receives a righteous person because he is a righteous person will receive a righteous person's reward.

And whoever gives one of these little ones even a cup of cold water because he is a disciple, truly I say to you, he will by no means lose his reward. We should also observe earlier in that same chapter, in chapter 10 of Matthew, Jesus sends out the twelve in a way that identifies with them and also uses a test of hospitality, the way that the cities and towns of Israel respond to them, as a test by which they will be judged in the final judgment. And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay there until you depart.

As you enter the house, greet it, and if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it, but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet when you leave that house or town. Truly I say to you, it will be more bearable on the day of judgment for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah than for that town.

Whether or not there is a large temporal hiatus, a gap between the events of AD 70 and the events of the end of the world, for instance, the end of Matthew 25 seems to involve a widening of the lens of discourse. The passages that precede it are focused upon the judgment of Israel and Jerusalem, but here it's the judgment of all the nations that is in view. The Son of Man is enthroned, he's the ruler not just of Israel, but of the whole world.

This is a reordering of the cosmos and of the entire order of the nations, not just of Israel. The identification between Jesus and his emissaries was first spoken of in the context of the disciples' mission among the towns and villages of Israel, and this parable seems to envisage the expansion of this into a broader mission among all of the nations of the world. Now that already took place in the events of the Book of Acts, and I think we have some anticipation of this in the Book of Revelation, where there are seven churches in Gentile cities that correspond, I believe, to the city of Jerusalem, which is the focus of the book.

So there's the destruction of Jerusalem in AD 70, but there's also judgment upon Gentile cities. So I think we're seeing at least the initial fulfillment of Matthew chapter 25 in AD 70 and the events around that. There's going to be judgment upon Gentile places along

with Israel.

Like the towns and the villages of Israel, the nations will be judged by the hospitality or the hostility that they show to the poor brethren of Jesus. The mission to the nations is in continuity with and is an escalation of the disciples' earlier mission to Israel, and it will lead to a similar judgment. Now although it's been suggested that the particularist reading of the least of these, the identification of the least of these with the particular disciples of Christ and the missionaries of Christ, challenges the ministry to the poor that the passage has inspired, I don't believe that that need to be the case.

The key element of this parable that we're in danger of forgetting is that Jesus comes incognito and the sheep entertain him unawares. Think about the example of Abraham who entertains angels unawares. He's a man of hospitality and that leads him to entertain angels not knowing that they're angels.

In the same way the people who are blessed here are blessed on account of their hospitality, not knowing who it is that they're entertaining. They don't know that they're entertaining Christ and his disciples. Now back in Matthew 10 there is a suggestion that there is some recognition that this is a righteous man or a prophet, so beware of overplaying this identification with the poor, but it is important.

One of the things that it does highlight is that Christ comes in a form that we would not expect. Israel was expecting one to come as a great king perhaps, and yet they find someone who eats with tax collectors and sinners, one who is a friend of prostitutes and those who are outcasts and hated and despised and marginalised. And Christ in a similar way tests our posture towards people in general.

Only by a greater extension of hospitality can we enjoy Jesus' particular presence. As Hebrews 13 verse 2 declares, maybe in the Eucharist or in the preaching of the Gospel or in the body of the Church. But a Jesus who can come to us as the unrecognised stranger, that can come to us as he came to Israel for instance, as one who breaks some of our taboos, as one who does not socialise with the refined people that we would want to socialise with, well that is a lot more unsettling and threatening perhaps.

How can we welcome such a king? The connection of the test of hospitality with divine judgement is not just found here and in Matthew chapter 10. We see the same thing in Genesis with the stark contrast between the unwitting welcome that Abraham extends to the angels and the attempted gang rape of the angels and Sodom. And in Ezekiel chapter 16 verses 40 to 50, God declares that Sodom's condemnation was related to its indifference and cruelty to the poor and the needy.

And that was displayed in their treatment of two unknown visitors. They didn't know that that was the day of their visitation. They didn't know that those visitors were angels.

They just treated them as they would have treated other visitors. And on various occasions throughout the Scriptures we see that the revelation of the presence of Christ or his people is rendered contingent upon the extension of hospitality to the poor and those in need. It's in the act of mercy of the Good Samaritan that a new neighbour relationship was formed, a new brethren.

The Samaritan and the man who fell among thieves were separated from those who had excluded themselves from their indifference to the one in need. And in that parable the people of God are established through that act of mercy. At Emmaus it was only through the hospitality extended to the unknown stranger that the presence of Christ was made known and a meal that was just a regular meal became a celebration of the Lord's Supper.

Something very similar occurs in the parable of the sheep and the goats then. It is as the sheep receive Jesus' poor brethren that they receive Jesus himself unawares. It's through this act of receiving Jesus' poor brethren that they themselves are marked out as the blessed heirs of the Father with them.

And so the precondition of fellowship with the exalted Son of Man is the welcome extended to the Jesus who comes to us in the guise of the needy stranger. As the abandoned or attacked or rejected prophet. And perhaps this suggests that our society's welcome to the exalted Son of Man will be tested and sought and demonstrated first.

Not in great cathedrals or in the eloquent prayers that people can give in halls of power but in soup kitchens and prison cells, in shelters and refuges. And on that day of judgment it will be the way that we have treated that person in need, that person who's the stranger, that person who's rejected, who came across our path. And in our posture towards such people we're being tested in our reception of Christ himself.

Christ will go on to be rejected by this people. He will be an outcast. He will be a crucified one.

One who's marked as a criminal, one who's shamed and publicly humiliated and marked. He identifies with the least. He's the one who becomes one of the least of his society.

And only a people who can reach out and recognize and love those who are the least and rejected and outcast will be able to receive such a Christ. A question to consider. How can the criteria of judgment suggested in this particular passage change or maybe challenge some of our ideas of what final judgment looks like?