

Fearing God in the New Year
Malachi 3:6-4:6
Sermon Outline

Introduction: We seem to be wired for hope, which is one of the reasons we tend to invest newness (like the New Year) with particular significance. The Bible is also full of hope. But with hope also comes the warning of judgment, and the prospect of judgment raises questions. Is judgment right? Assuming that there will be judgment, how do we face it?

I) Is judgment right?

A) No one really wants a judgment-free world.

B) Isn't biblical judgment over-the-top, inappropriate?

4:1, 3 ...burning like an oven... setting the wicked ablaze until they become ashes under the soles of our feet

- Metaphor

C) Imbedded in our critique as a foolish assumption—that we are capable of assessing the Assessor

- The problem with Malachi's hearers
- *3:13-- Your words have been hard against me*
- Their assessment of themselves versus God's assessment
 - *Serving God (3:14) versus robbing God (3:8)*
 - *3:7-- from the days of your fathers you have turned aside...*

D) Questions for us

- When our children are sick, to whom do we go for a diagnosis?
 - *Jer. 17:9-- The heart is deceitful and wicked above all things. Who can understand it?*
- What are we doing with our money and things, and what does that reveal about our hearts' true affection?

II) How do we face God's judgment?

A) With present fear

3:16, 4:2

Not by deciding to be nicer in 2010 (implementing a New Year resolution)

Rather by taking God seriously: facing the Person now whom we will face then

B) Remembering that he loves us.

3:6—I the Lord do not change; therefore you...are not consumed

The only reason that things are not much worse than they presently are...

C) Jesus and the promises of God

Conclusion: To fear God is to take him seriously—not only his commands but his gifts—especially the gift of his Son.

Questions for Reflection this Week

- 1) The Bible is forthright about declaring that there will be a day of judgment. How do you react to this idea and why?
- 2) In “Imagine” John Lennon dreamed of a world without judgment:

Imagine there's no heaven
It's easy if you try
No hell below us
Above us only sky
Imagine all the people
Living for today...

Imagine there's no countries
It isn't hard to do
Nothing to kill or die for
And no religion too
Imagine all the people
Living life in peace...

You may say I'm a dreamer

But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will be as one

Imagine no possessions
I wonder if you can
No need for greed or hunger
A brotherhood of man
Imagine all the people
Sharing all the world...

You may say I'm a dreamer
But I'm not the only one
I hope someday you'll join us
And the world will live as one
Imagine a judgment-free world.

How does this vision work? What makes it appealing? What is missing?

- 3) Respond to the following: “The biggest problem with us condemning God for condemning people is that it assumes that we know more than God does about the human condition and about human significance.”
- 4) Through Malachi God calls the people thieves because they are not bringing the full tithe into the store house in accordance with God’s commands. Why is such behavior theft?
- 5) Malachi tells us that the best way to ready ourselves for the coming judgment is to fear God—which means to take him seriously. Why does he put it this way? Why for example does he not say that the best way to prepare is to work hard at being better people?
- 6) Taking God seriously includes taking his promises and gifts seriously. List the promises to be found in Malachi 3:6 through 4:6. Bearing 3:6 in mind (*I the Lord do not change*), spend time thanking God for each of these promises and then make a plan for orienting your behavior around at least one of the promises.