

Sonoraville Baptist Church
Sunday, August 7, 2011 – 11:00 AM
Rev. Steve Skates, Pastor

Series: Every Christian a Minister
Is It Worth It? – Malachi 3:14

Introduction: Erma Bombeck wrote: *“If life is like a bowl of cherries, then why am I always in the pits?”* Rodney Dangerfield said that a psychiatrist once told him he was crazy. He told him that he want a second opinion. So he said *“Okay you’re ugly too!”*

George Goble was once a guest on the Johnny Carson Show along with Dean Martin, Bob Hope and Jimmy Stewart – three of the most successful men in Hollywood. After a few minutes, he spoke up and said, *“Have you ever had the feeling like the whole world is a black tuxedo and you’re a pair of brown shoes?”*

Have you ever had a time when you identify with those people? Sometimes we may feel like the world is against us and nobody cares. It can be a lonesome and depressing feeling, and Christians are not immune. Sometimes, as servants of God, we get tired. We get frustrated. We get stressed out and think that nobody cares, and it is in those moments that our feelings of inadequacy can run wild. It can even overwhelm us to the point where we think it’s true!

We look at others in this world who get recognized for even the smallest things, and we wonder, *“Where’s my trophy?” “Where’s my raise?” “Where’s my promotion?”* We can get to the point where we ask, *“Is it worth it? Does it even pay to serve God?”*

Malachi addresses these questions in his prophecy at the end of the Old Testament. He wrote in **Malachi 3:13-18 (NIV)**:

13 “You have said harsh things against me,” says the LORD. “Yet you ask, ‘What have we said against you?’

14 “You have said, ‘It is futile to serve God. What did we gain by carrying out his requirements and going about like mourners before the LORD Almighty?’

15 But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape.”

16 Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other, and the LORD listened and heard. A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.

17 “They will be mine,” says the LORD Almighty, “in the day when I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.

18 And you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not.

This morning, we’re bringing our series to a close on “Every Christian a Minister.” This last message addresses the issue of discouragement in our Christian walk. Serving God and ministering in His name, while it is a duty of every believer, also carries with it the possibility that it may have to be accomplished without any fanfare or recognition in a thankless vacuum.

Discouragement is a common occurrence that every Christian has to deal with at some point in their lives so I want to approach this issue with the goal in mind that we will not allow it to defeat us. May we come to understand the Biblical principle that says, *“If God is for us, who can be against us”* for that is the premise on which we must take up the towel of service and ministry. First, in times of discouragement:

1. God Listens

In our text for today, the faithful remnant of God’s people had reach a point in their lives when they began to wonder if their faithfulness and service to God was worth it. They turned to God with a grumbling and complaining spirit because all the outward signs seemed to indicate that their service to God just wasn’t paying off. These people had returned to Israel after being held captive in Babylonian exile, and had took on the task of rebuilding the wall around Jerusalem. In many ways, it epitomized their trying to rebuild their shattered lives. And at this point, their efforts seemed futile – like chasing their own shadow or trying to catch the wind. *“It’s vain to serve God,”* they said. *“It’s an empty and pointless pursuit,”* they complained. It serves no purpose.

Have you ever felt that way? Be honest now! I know it doesn’t sound like anything a real Christian would say, but doesn’t it sound conceivable? Yes it does! We’ve probably all been there.

In fact, some of the great champions of faith had their discouraging moments. Jeremiah once became so depressed, he accused God of deceiving him by calling him to be a prophet. John the Baptist, in a moment of

depression sent two of his disciples to ask Jesus if He really was the Messiah. Are we any better than these? If thoughts like these can torment even the faithful in Biblical days, they can torment us as well.

The point I'm making is that those who are serious about serving God have God's attention. And that means that God listens when His servants are leaning out over the precipice of doubt and confusion and are about to fall into the canyon of depression.

Vs. 16 says, "...the LORD listened and heard." In their midnight cry of despair, the Lord sat up and listened and responded with mercy and grace. He wasn't too busy to hear. He wasn't so preoccupied with running the universe that He could not listen the cries of His people. God's attention span is what it has always been – eternal and total. He always listens to His people when their faith begins to falter and their doubts begin to mount up. You need to know that when no one else may appreciate you, shut you out, or ignore you, God listens and promises His care. Secondly, we need to know that in times of discouragement:

2. God Encourages

Look at vs. 16 again. It says, "*Then those who feared the LORD talked with each other...*" As the final flicker of faith began to die out, these faithful few lived in the spirit of **Hebrews 3:13 (NIV)** which says, "*But encourage one another daily, as long as it is called Today, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness.*" They looked to each other in order to ultimately find the faith to turn to God. Perhaps they saw in each other a reminder of a once strong faith in God. Maybe they were reminded how God had been faithful to Abraham, Moses, and Joshua. The point is, they found encouragement in each other to carry on.

Their action is reminiscent of how geese find the strength to head south for the winter. As each bird flaps its wings, it creates uplift for the bird following behind. And by flying in a V formation, the entire flock adds 70% greater flying range than if each bird flew alone. So like a flock of geese flying in a V formation, these faithful few gained strength and encouragement from each other to stay faithful.

The lesson is, in our Christian service, it is critical that we find ways to encourage one another. And we encourage one another by staying close to each other in worship and fellowship, because that is how we gain the strength and courage to help us through the tough times. Like the famous redwoods of California whose roots intertwine, when our lives intertwine, we literally hold each other up against the bitter winds and storms of life, and we find the means to grow strong and tall.

But if we try to go it alone, we run the risk of stress and burn out. When we depend on our own strength, our own cleverness, and our own abilities, we are carrying a burden we were never meant to shoulder. Our ministry and our service is to follow Christ and minister in His name, not our own. We don't have to empower what God can do. Any power we may exhibit is found only in the Word of God coming alive in the hearts and lives of others.

So, we were meant to build each other up in Christ. As Paul explained to the Ephesians in 4:11-16, God has prepared His people for works of service so that the whole body might be strengthened with each part doing its own work. Third, we need to know in times of discouragement:

3. God Remembers

Now one of the sad facts of life is that there are two things that tend to happen as a person gets older. The first is memory loss. The second is...well, I can't remember what the second is. Sometimes we get like the old cowboy who found himself standing in the middle of his field with a rope in his hand. He couldn't remember if he'd found a rope or lost his horse!

But listen, God is older than any of us but He doesn't have a problem with memory. We don't have to worry about Him forgetting about us. In fact, those who fear Him – those who have a proper and healthy respect for Him and encourage one another; they are at the top of his memory list. The only thing He ever chooses to forget is our sins when we confess them to Him and ask for His forgiveness (Psalm 103:12).

The last part of vs. 16 says, "*A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the LORD and honored his name.*" Notice the phrase, "*in His presence.*" When you consider everything that is before God – His creation, the universe, the galaxies, the heavenly host, and every person who has ever existed or who will ever exist, it is an awesome thing that the names of His chosen servants are singled out one by one, always before His memory.

In vs. 17, Malachi makes mention that God considers us to be a "*treasured possession.*" The Hebrew word used there is *segullah* and it refers to a king's personal treasure. Now in ancient empires, the king owned everything, and when you own it all, it is difficult to have the satisfaction of owning anything specific. But a

segullah refers to something of personal value that the king would keep on his person at all times – perhaps a jewel in a pouch. He would occasionally take out that precious jewel and just roll it around in his hand to remind him of his personal treasure.

That is how God feels about us. We are His prized possession. When the day is done and the last battle is won, the most valuable thing in all of creation to the Lord is His faithful servant. That is a magnificent picture of His love for us. Now think about it...Wouldn't you rather be a treasure than have a treasure?

The world may forget us a few years after we die, but God remembers. He always knows your name because He has chosen to keep you on His mind and in His heart. Keep that in mind the next time you feel discouraged and start to lose heart. God knows your situation and He has a purpose for your present circumstance. Finally, we need to know that in times of discouragement:

4. Our Lives Point to God

The original questions we posed today was: In the end, is it worth it? Does it pay to serve God? This was on the minds of the faithful remnant in Malachi's day. In **Malachi 3:14 (NIV)** they asked, "*What did we gain by carrying out his requirements?*" They saw the fortunes of the wicked unbelievers around them, but they couldn't see any profit or gain by their service to God. In comparison to the "*live-it-up*" lifestyle of the unbelievers, they saw themselves as mourners – people who looked like they had lost their best friend – people who were the subject of the song by the Soggy Bottom Boys, "*A Man of Constant Sorrow.*"

In their depressed and discouraged state of mind, these people were on the brink of believing in the backward beatitudes:

- Blessed are the arrogant for they shall get ahead
- Blessed are the evildoers for they shall prosper
- Blessed are those who test God, for they shall escape.

The discouraged faithful were on the verge of concluding that the blessing actually fell on those who had no faith. But in their despair, they were wrong. Yes, the wicked may have full bank accounts. They may live the lavish lifestyle. They may live close to the edge and seemingly never fall off. But how far can they go in their own exalted self-concept? How much can they get away with before God acts?

In our text, God assured His people that their lives were counting for something eternal. Their righteousness was actually pointing people to God. Their prayers, their repentant lifestyles, and their search for truth and righteousness were being noticed.

Then God comforted His people with the promise that they would be spared. He one day they would see the eternal distinction between the righteous and the wicked. One day they would come to understand that the blessings of God are not limited to this temporary existence, but will be fully realized in eternity.

Jesus spelled out this promise in His "*Sermon on the Mount*" when He explained the standard for God's blessing in the Beatitudes. He said that the humble, the peacemakers, and those who truly seek God with a single-minded devotion – they were the ones who are the truly blessed. He went on to explain that God does not judge a person by the clothes they wear or the status they may attain in this life. In fact, His standards don't even take into account outward religious observances, but only an observance of the law of love. That is why Jesus said in **John 15:12 (NIV)** "*My command is this: Love each other as I have loved you.*" And it is why John would later write in **1 John 3:16,18 (NIV)** "*This is how we know what love is: Jesus Christ laid down his life for us. And we ought to lay down our lives for our brothers....Dear children, let us not love with words or tongue but with actions and in truth.*"

Conclusion: Does it pay to serve God? Is it worth it to live a life of devotion and ministry in the name of Jesus? YES! The reason is because God is worthy of our best efforts and our highest devotion. He alone is worthy of our all. Living a life of service and devotion will point others to God. That is our calling, and it should be our delight, for we find life's greatest joy and fulfillment in serving God.

So let's not look back and say, "*It's not worth it.*" Let's look forward with our eyes on the prize and say, "*...I am still not all I should be, but I am focusing all my energies on this one thing: Forgetting the past and looking forward to what lies ahead, I (press on) to reach the end of the race and receive the prize for which God, through Christ Jesus, is calling us up to heaven.*" **Philippians 3:13-14 (NLT).** That's our pay day!