



## **GOD HEARS TWO KINDS OF TALK**

Text: Malachi 3:13-18

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My father used to say that people could speak 'out of both sides of their mouth'. What he meant was that we can have a 'public persona' where we speak nicely and politely. And we can have a 'private persona' where we speak more crudely and even cruelly. This has come out with a few politicians. Do you remember the time the British Prime Minister, Gordon Brown, was 'forced to make a grovelling apology to a pensioner for calling her a bigot'. He didn't say it to her face. He had driven off after meeting the people. But he didn't realize he was still wearing a microphone and the media was taping! In the car he complained to his campaign minder 'Who was that woman? Who put her forward? What a bigoted woman'. Mr. Brown is not the only politician to get caught out that way. Fact is, I think all of us could be found in a compromising position if a microphone were put near us at an unguarded moment! I think it fair to say we are all glad there is no one eavesdropping on so many of our conversations.

Now if we think that, what does it say about God? Has he gone deaf? There is no one eavesdropping our conversations? Really? I remember a plaque my parents had in the lounge that said 'God is the silent witness to our conversations'. In Malachi 3:13 we read: "*You have said harsh things against me' says the Lord.*" The people didn't say it to God. They said harsh things about God to each other. And God had heard it all. One commentator said 'All of our life is a theatre and we are the actors. Every kitchen, every car, every office, every bedroom, every bar is a stage. And God is in the front row of the theatre and does not miss a single line in the drama of our life. Not one! No matter where or when or with whom we speak, God hears our conversations and he

interprets perfectly what they imply about him.' You see that is what really matters about all of our conversations. What are we saying or implying about God?

Here in our text Malachi says that God hears the conversations from two kinds of people. There are those who say they are God's people, but their private conversations reveal otherwise. They are the ones we have seen in Malachi who go through the rituals of worship but their hearts are not in it. And then there are those who truly serve God, and reveal it in the way they speak. It showed that there was still a remnant who really understood God's worth in this spiritually dark time in Israel.

Let's look at the first group in verse 13-15. In response to God's complaint they ask *'What have we said against you?'* The reply is (:14&15) *"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? But now we call the arrogant blessed. Certainly the evildoers prosper, and even those who challenge God escape."* Does this sound familiar? It should. It's a similar complaint Israel made back in 2:17 *"All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them"*. You would have to say they sure are slow learners. They keep making the same mistake. Well actually worse. Last time they asked *"Where is the God of justice?"* Now they say outright *"What did we gain (profit) by carrying out his requirements."* The word 'gain' in the Hebrew is 'basa'. It referred to those who weaved cloth. 'Basa' meant to cut off whatever cloth was left over to keep it for yourself. It meant 'taking your cut' of that which was not yours.

In our modern setting what they are saying goes like this: 'What's the point of living in a distinctly Christian way? Why should we bother to grow as disciples of Jesus? OK, so on Sunday we will be in church, and we will sound all pious. But during the week why should we bother being different? It doesn't gain us anything. Because those who don't love God are well off. The arrogant still have a great time.' There seems to be the assumption that if we obey God, God will now make us rich and our life wonderful. But when you look around, you see that how we behave towards God doesn't seem to have any effect on how well off we are. Or even how well we are. So the conclusion is that, not only is it pointless to serve God, but it is profitable not to. Now none of us might say that directly. But imagine conversations where we say 'Joe Bloggs, who never comes to church, is doing really well in his business. Mary Brown, who's an

atheist, has never had a sick day in her life'. And we think of that football player, arrogant, loves his drink, who is a womanizer, and look at all the money he makes playing football. What are we implying? 'It is profitable not to serve God. What really counts is how much money you make, how much fun you have. And that good life you can have without worrying about God'. The problem with this attitude is that it has the wrong values. It assumes lots of money and the good times is what it's all about. And then the question becomes: 'How do we get it? How do we get our cut?' The underlying assumption is that 'If we serve God he will bless us with health and wealth. If not, why bother, if others have health and wealth anyway?' You see the people of Israel in Malachi's time thought they were righteous just because they practiced certain religious rituals. And they thought God would do his thing and bless them with health and wealth. That approach is a long way from Jesus who said *"Take up your cross and follow me"*.

Let's look at the second group in verses 16&17: *"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 honoured his name."* Notice God really tunes in to those who 'fear' him. What does that mean? Sinclair Ferguson wrote 'It is at one and the same time (1) a consciousness of being in the presence of True Greatness and Majesty; (2) a thrilling sense of privilege; (3) an overflow of respect and admiration; and perhaps supremely, (4) a sense that his opinion about my life is the only thing that really matters.' When we fear God, his Fatherly approval means everything. And the loss of his approval is the greatest of all griefs. To fear God is to have a heart that is sensitive to both his greatness and his graciousness. A.W. Tozer said 'To know God is to fear him and to be stunned by the splendour of his majesty.'

Fearing God means we tremble at the thought of offending God by anything we do or say or even think. It is the feeling that God is not to be trifled with. It's the opposite of those who dare to say serving God doesn't get you anywhere. It's not very fashionable to say we 'fear God'. Too often now God is simply a mate who helps us. God talk is often devoid of any reverence or dignity. We can come before God in worship without any sense of awe. The commentator Matthew Henry once wrote 'The worse others are in the world, the better we should be. When vice is daring, let not virtue be sneaking around.' How often don't we as Christians sneak around because we fear the ridicule of

other people more than we fear God? But that's not the way to go. We must be people who '*honour God's name*'. It means we live and speak in such a way that people end up saying, 'Isn't God wonderful. Tell me more about this God who is so good'. Years ago I stood by a young man in court for possession of drugs. Through his actions his wife left him, his kids were taken by Department of Community Services. I was the only person who supported him through his trial. He asked me 'Why do you bother? Why do you care?' I said, 'As an expression of thanks for what Jesus did for me. God has been so gracious to me, so now I want to be gracious to you'. He said 'I want to know more about Jesus'. A few days later we kneeled together in my study as he was converted. The things you do at school or work, or going out, the things you say, do they reveal the wonder and grace of God? Do they bring God honour and praise as people watch you and hear you? Notice how Malachi mentions those who 'serve' God. Being God's servant is not just the role for ministers or missionaries. It's the calling of every Christian. It means we dedicate each day, wherever we are, whatever we are doing, to God. We do what we do in such a way that it is done in service to God. Our thinking should not be like those Malachi was criticising. God does not exist just to meet our demands. If anything we exist to meet his requirements. He is the master; we are the servants. He has rights; we have responsibilities. He is to be worshipped; we are the worshippers. God is not just the 'big guy in the sky' or the 'man upstairs'. He is the Lord of Hosts, King of Kings, the Almighty. The only proper response he deserves is one of great respect and willing service.

Now this is all well and good. But what do we do with the fact that it seems that those who don't care about God seem to prosper. And those who fear God don't seem to be rewarded for the good they do? Well listen again to verse 16: "*Then those who feared the Lord talked with each other, and the Lord listened and heard*". We get the sense God deliberately leans in to listen. He does not just 'overhear' as with the foolish talk. God loves to focus on what we say when we are those who 'fear God'. It means God promises that not one tiny word of goodness will fall to the ground without God's noticing it. That time you said something that honoured God, that time you stood your ground and quietly feared God rather than fearing the ridicule of friends, that word of encouragement when you "*talked with each other*", God heard it. He loves it and focuses on it. God not only overhears the silly talk, the arrogant talk, the faithless talk. He listens for every good word you have ever spoken and ever will speak. He knows what you said, when you said, where you said it, why you said it. Not only does God

hear what we say, he remembers it: (16) ... *A scroll of remembrance was written in his presence concerning those who feared the Lord and honoured his name.*" This means that God will never forget the good we have done for his honour. It may look forgotten and unrewarded now. But God is not ungracious or unjust. Every lesson faithfully prepared for God's Own, every courtesy shown during Melbourne's peak hour traffic, every smile on the street for that person who needed cheering, every thank you note you wrote, every 'I'm sorry will you forgive me?', every bit of discipling we do – every fragment of grace in your life is being written in the book of remembrance. When the final day comes God will make known the joy you have given him with every gracious word you have spoken as God's servant.

Your reward is that on the day of judgment God will 'spare' you. (:16) *'They will be mine' says the Lord Almighty, 'in the day I make up my treasured possession. I will spare them. Just as in compassion a man spares his son who serves him.'* Malachi makes it clear that this life is not all there is. If it was, why not grab as much as we can to enjoy the relatively short time we have? Why shouldn't God give us all the good stuff? But the big picture here is, there is an eternal life of which our time here is only the precursor. That's what we need to keep in mind when we struggle. We are not home yet. Malachi points out on the day of judgement (:17) *"...you will again see the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not."* Then everyone will meet justice. Jesus pointed out that (Matthew 12:36-37) *"...people will have to give an account on the day of judgment for every careless word they have spoken. For by your words you will be acquitted and by your words you will be condemned"* .

How can it be that we would be spared on that day when so much of our talk is still of the first kind, arrogant, self centred and not honouring God? That's where Jesus comes in. How can a holy God 'spare' a sinful son or daughter? Because of Jesus' death on the cross and his resurrection! It is through our faith in Jesus, openly confessed, not sneaking around, that we are the children of God. What is even more astonishing is that not only are we 'spared', but regarded by God as his 'treasured possession'. The Hebrew word there is 'segula' which means 'jewels', in fact the 'crown' jewels. In other words, we are God's greatest treasure. Isn't that just awesome? Almighty God, who has created this vast universe, says of the likes of you and me, 'You are my most treasured possession. I treasure you more than anything else in all creation!' And if you find that

hard to accept just think of the cost to God, the price he paid to have you as his 'segula', his 'crown jewels'. It cost him everything he had, everything he cherished the most; his son. That's why we 'fear' God and are in awe of his majesty and his grace. A God so awesome, graciously giving so much, deserves all we can give, and way beyond, in honour and service.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

*These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.*

- Why did God say the people of Israel said "Harsh things against" him? How might we end up doing that sort of thing? Have you done that?
- What does it mean to 'fear God' & 'honour him'? What is your attitude to God currently? In what way might you need to change? Do you fear people more than God? What will you do about it?
- Would God enjoy what he hears in your conversations? Would he write it in his 'scroll of remembrance'? How do you respond to the idea that you are God's 'treasured possession'?