



Dr. James C. Howell  
Malachi 3:1 – 4:6  
August 9, 2009

God is a fire. God is a consuming fire. God is a refiner's fire. God is a fire. You might prefer a God who is merely a warm blanket or a light bulb that we turn on at will, but Malachi graces us with the knowledge that God is a fire.

We've come now to the end of the Old Testament as we are on our quest to read through the Bible this year, and we come to the very last sentence in the Old Testament, and it goes like this, God says "*Lest I come and smite the land with a curse.*" That's no way to end the book. The last word in the Old Testament is *curse*. I mean, if God had any authorial sense, instead of ending a good book with the word *curse*, God would end the book with, you know, something like *love or kindness or sweetness*, something like that, but, *curse*, I mean, that's no way to end a book. The Old Testament, God is a refining fire.

This last prophet who speaks on behalf of God is named Malachi. In Hebrew, Malachi means either my messenger or my angel, same Hebrew word. We think about angels and we think there are angels who would help us find our car keys when we've lost them or something. The Biblical angels are always very different from this. I told you before what Elie Wiesel said; Elie Wiesel said, "If an angel ever says *Be not afraid*, you'd better watch out because it means that a big assignment is on the way."

Malachi comes from big assignments from God. Malachi comes with threatening news from God that ends with "*Lest I come and smite the land with a curse.*" Malachi says that his message in Hebrew is a *massah*. A *massah* is something that is heavy. It is a burden. It is something that is weighty. It is something that is deep. It is something that is profound. I wonder if you and I are really ready for a word of God that is a *massah*, something that is a burden, something that is heavy. We might prefer religion light, something simple, a little morsel that is easily digested instead of something that is heavy, and yet, Malachi comes and says that God is a fire. God is a consuming fire.

It reminds me of the lovely moment in one of our family's favorite comedy films "Bowfinger." In "Bowfinger," Eddie Murphy plays this actor who is crazy. He's a little bit paranoid, schizophrenic and thinks crazy thoughts. He goes to a counselor to help him get through the day and the counselor has him repeat this little mantra when he begins to have crazy thoughts. What he repeats during the day is this, he says, "Even though I think I might, I probably won't ignite. Even though I think I might, I probably won't ignite." I thought that's kind of been the Methodist message for a number of decades now. We think we might ignite, but probably not. God wants us not to think that we probably won't ignite. God wants us to ignite, to be on fire with this God who is a fire. God is the refiner's fire. We love the notion that God accepts us just the way we are. Tony Campolo jabs fun at churches that have these altar calls, you know, where they sing "Just As I Am," many stanzas of "Just As I Am" and he said that people come forward, just the way they are and then he said when the service is over they go back out the door just the way they were. Nothing has really changed. They haven't really been

ignited by God, refiners. I confessed this at 9:45. You know, I preach four times every Sunday and so I see how this is going. I did it at 8:30 in here. It was not good. And I did it down the hall in Church In The Round and that wasn't good either. And so, by 9:45, I just confessed to them, I said, "This sermon is no good. It's got some nice stuff in it and it's got some nice stuff in it that you'd actually enjoy hearing because it's got some religion light. It's got this little closing thing where I seize on this thing where Malachi talks about God being like the rising sun, and I had this bit about "our lives are dark sometimes and we look for God to be the rising...." it's great. And I had this quote from the "Lord of the Rings" where Pippin thinks everything is lost – and again everything is going to be OK, and you would have walked out and said "Lovely sermon, preacher, that was a lovely sermon." It's no good, and I'll tell you why it's no good. Malachi is deadly serious with a word that we would rather dismiss. Malachi says "God is a fire and you will be burnt to a crisp if you don't attend to what God is saying." God is a fire, threatening us with a curse. We don't like that. What you and I like is more pleasant conversation. We're good at it. I've been to dinner with a few of you. We're good at making pleasant conversation. We enjoy pleasant conversation. I have a friend and his wife – she's a friend, too – they're coming over tonight, and we're going to have pleasant conversation. You like to go to parties and be with people who are very pleasant. We come to church and we're just very pleasant people. And we don't know what to do with somebody like Malachi, who doesn't say, "Ah, God is pleasant and you are, too." Instead, Malachi says, "God is a fire and there's a curse that's hanging over your head. You're being threatened. We don't like that idea and we have ways of dealing with it. One of the ways we deal with it is, we say "Malachi, that's in the Old Testament." We are theologically cagey. What we say is "That's the Old Testament..." I got a bunch of e-mails from people this week saying, "I am glad we are through with the Old Testament because God in the Old Testament is angry. God in the Old Testament seems kind of harsh. I can't wait to get to the New Testament where God is love." I was responding to these in the wrong way. I was responding to these by saying, "Have you read the Old Testament? In the Old Testament God is love, God is patient, God is all of these things." The way I should have answered is "Have you read the New Testament?" It's fine to say, "Oh, the New Testament is the God of love" if you haven't read it. Jesus very much like Malachi holds out the possibility of a curse. Jesus comes to the most religious, pious, holy, prayerful people of his day and he says, "There's a curse awaiting. God is a fire and you are in considerable danger."

I'll just confess to you – I can't figure out how to preach this sermon. Partly, I don't know how to talk about it and I think, even if I knew how to talk about it, you wouldn't know how to hear it because we have this pleasant notion of God, the idea that God might look at our lives and not be so pleased by them, and that God might actually rage with anger and with fire. That just seems so alien to us if we think that God judges at all. We think, Well surely, God grades on the curve and if God grades on the curve we'll come out pretty well. Look at us. We're good people, we're nice people, and so, the fact is, I don't know how to explain it, but I'm off my sermon notes now. So we're winging this. The fact is, you and I have an enormous problem. It's not that you and I have a little problem, like, I've got a little bit of a headache and if I just take a God aspirin my head will feel better. We don't have a little problem like that, we have a huge problem. Our problem is we're totally lost. We're sinners, we're running all the time, no matter how nice we seem we're running in head-long rebellion against God. We don't even know it. It feels nice. It feels like we're being religious but the fact is, we're really just living for ourselves. We're really just living self-indulgent lives and hoping that God will just give us a boost along the way, isn't it

true? The part that was in this sermon that's actually pretty good is that John Wesley – we're talking about Methodist heritage days – John Wesley preached on this passage and the part that he focused on is when Malachi says, on behalf of God, "You people are stealing from me" and the people respond by saying "God, how are stealing from you?" John Wesley explains how we rob God. He says, first of all, we rob God when it comes to our money. We just do. We're spending some time this week beginning to work on our Fall stewardship campaign. I know you're excited about that. I know that probably Wednesday and Thursday this week, when you prayed for the church and the pastor, you said, "Lord, help them come up with really clever ways to get more of my money." I know you prayed that this week. And we're thinking about ways of doing the Fall stewardship campaign. One of the things that we will talk about is what Malachi talks about, tithing, this classic notion that you give 10 percent of all that you have to the church. The fact is, that as Methodists, we probably shouldn't talk about tithing because John Wesley, our founder, was adamantly opposed to tithing, and the reason he was opposed to tithing is he thought that was just way too chintzy. I mean, you only give 10 percent of your money to God? How pathetic. Wesley would say "How dare you keep 90 percent for yourself and only give 10 percent for God." He said, "This is theft from God." I'm going to preach that this Fall and see how that goes. This is theft from God. It's something, isn't it, if we believe that all of our blessings come from God, then by what right do we spend the vast majority of it on our own pleasures and our own comforts, while the work of God is languishing, while there are poor in the streets? What Malachi says is that if you keep up these ways, there's a curse, there are consequences. You will be burned by fire, harsh talk.

Wesley goes on to say that we rob God in other ways. He says, "We rob God when we water down God's demands and make it like, God just wants you to be a nice person who doesn't break the law." He says this is robbing God of what God really asks for us. He says, "When we do not pray much, this is theft against God," and I would add that it's theft against ourselves. We're busy, you're busy. I see some of you during the week. You're rushing around, I'm rushing around. You should see my calendar – it's just black all over, I've got so much to do, we've all got so much to do – we're rushing from one place to another and we think that prayer is a good idea and what happens is we squeeze in a few seconds here and there. John Wesley says this is theft from God. God offers us this extraordinary gift that actually all day long, every day, we could think of God as our traveling companion, and we just silently converse with God over everything that we see, over every conversation that we have as we walk down the hall, as we eat...He says that when we refuse to engage in acts of mercy to those who are in need and who are poor, he says this is theft against God. What you and I so often do is we get to thinking "I'm doing something good. That's a good idea. I'm going to do that this Fall sometime. I'm going to volunteer a couple of hours this Fall sometime. I'm going to get around to that this Fall and when I do it, I am going to feel so very noble about myself, I'll probably call Kevin Wright and brag to him that I volunteered a couple of hours this Fall." Actually, God says, "All of the time that you have is a gift that I have given you." Every breath that you take, every day that you have is a gift of God. There are people for whom God's heart is breaking every day and God, through Malachi, would say "You give me two hours this Fall?" Sometimes there's a curse being dangled for people such as this.

It's serious, we are lost, but it's not a counsel of despair. How should we say it? I looked at my sermon this morning and just thought "Awww, this is terrible," and I preach it anyway, and

what do you do? I thought about it and I thought, "How do I talk about this now, and how do I say it?" I'm trying to tell you this because I love you. This isn't – nobody's beating you over the head – think about what it is to live a two-bit life apart from God. It seems like it is fun. It seems like it is so gratifying, but at the end of the day, isn't it a hollow light? At the end of the day, aren't you kind of bored by all that the world has to offer? At the end of the day, isn't it the most marvelous act of God's grace that God loves us enough to dangle before us this curse and to say, "This is what could happen – you could live all of your life, and it could just be pointless. You could live all of your life and at the day you just would have nothing to show for it. At the end of the day, you could live your life and all you did was you just lived for yourself and you did a few little acts of religion here and there to make you feel better about yourself." There are consequences to leading a life apart from God. Doesn't it feel vapid and hollow never to have been ignited for God? Never to know what it is to have a deep passion for something that has eternal merit? Isn't it cold where we are not ignited for God? Isn't it true poverty not to be ignited by the deep riches that God offers to us? God dangles this before us. There are consequences. Jesus did the same thing. Have you read the New Testament? Jesus came to religious people and he dangled before them the possibility of everything being lost, that all is coming to nothing if we don't have faith in him and for him. Faith in him is not just some bland thought that, "Yes, there's a God and I'll have a religious something every once in awhile when it's convenient." No, faith is when you put everything behind. You do not defend yourself or your turf or your stuff any longer. You say, "Lord, it is all yours, all of my time, all of my time, all of my heart. There's nothing that I want except for you, Lord, your consuming fire to come down and to engulf me in the flames of your spirit so that I might be a bright light for you to know what it is to be burned up, totally for the love of God." Malachi is serious. Jesus was serious. We are serious this day. Can you continue to live the life that you've been leading, having fun, going to work, buying stuff when you can, going off on vacation, having a nice time, being at parties, making pleasant conversation? Is that really enough? I don't think so. There is a God who wants, not a little more, God wants all of us. God wants to be that consuming fire to come down and to ignite our souls.

I had to tell them at 9:45 that since I'm way off script, I don't have any ending to this sermon. I don't want to talk all day. I'll just leave it at that because at the end of the day, it's really up to you. Will you have faith or not? Will you be ignited or not? God is really serious, and you and I have a huge problem. God is good enough to dangle before us the possibility of what life without God might be like.