

A BURDENED PEOPLE

+ **SESSION IN A SENTENCE:**

All humans are guilty because of sin, but those who feel the shame of their sin and repent will receive the Lord's compassion.

+ **BACKGROUND PASSAGES:**

Malachi; James 2

+ **SETTING:**

Ezra and Nehemiah both led groups of exiled Jews back to Jerusalem, recognizing God's hand in putting them under Persian rulers who didn't mind their return to their homeland and worship of their God. But just because God's hand was leading didn't mean the people had turned back to the Lord completely. Just like Moses dealt with the sins of the Israelites who had accompanied him out of slavery in Egypt, so Ezra and Nehemiah dealt with sin even in the midst of rebuilding the temple and the walls. Had they fallen so far away from God that they didn't even feel their guilt?

DAY 1

READ:

James 2

FOCAL PASSAGE:

James 2:10-11

NOTES



ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #45: GUILT AND SHAME

Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a wrong committed as well as the incurring of punishment that comes with it (Matthew 5:21-22; James 2:10). Shame is the emotional pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.

James 2 begins with the topic of favoritism, reminding those in the church not to show favoritism towards those who are rich over those who are poor. James realized the church was sometimes guilty of doing this and reminded his readers that sometimes it's the little sins, the subtle ones, that can wreak havoc in our souls. It's the sins of how we treat each other, how we may not show love or grace or forgiveness to others, that will end up leading us down a wrong path.

James's words in today's focal passage are a reflection of the Old Testament teaching about the law: it's all or nothing. God didn't give His commands with cafeteria-style expectations. So in considering the Ten Commandments, when we think, "I've got 'Do not murder' and 'Do not make an idol,' with no problems," James reminds us that "Do not covet" and "Honor your father and mother" are still there.

This is frustrating on the surface because it makes us think: "Good grief! Who, then, could manage it?" Which points us to the truth—no one. God knew no human could ever follow the law, but He wanted us to realize our need for His mercy and to cast ourselves upon Him for salvation.

God didn't give the law so that we would become good humans; He gave it to show just how very pitiful we are and how badly we need a Savior since we can't be justified and saved on our own strength (see Romans 3:19-24). But that truth doesn't negate His standards. We should still strive to obey, strive to honor Him, and strive to walk holy. But with every stumbling step, we also testify to God's grace, mercy, and power to save.

How can James 2:10-11 lead you to begin today with a prayer of confession and repentance?

DAY 2

READ:

Malachi 3:1-6

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Malachi 3:6

NOTES

Solomon reflected, “There is nothing new under the sun” (Ecclesiastes 1:9). That’s a great quote that I’ve heard applied to many things: wayward teenagers, crabgrass, family struggles, and conflicts in church. It actually reflects the Bible and the history of humankind: we’re pretty rotten, selfish creatures who do our best to push away our holy, almighty God.

But here’s where the “nothing new under the sun” quote is even more accurate: God does not change (Malachi 3:6). Though God’s people were living differently because the world around them changed, they assumed God had changed as well. He hasn’t and He never will.

It’s not just that God Himself is unchanging; everything about Him is unchanging, as well: His words (Numbers 23:19, Isaiah 40:8), His counsel (Psalm 33:11), the character of His purpose (Hebrews 6:17), and His standing as the only God (Psalm 90:2). And just when we want to complain that God is unchanging, as though that were a negative thing, we need to remember that it’s because He is unchanging that we are not destroyed.

That’s exactly what the Lord said to His people in Malachi 3:6—because He has not changed, the Israelites had not been destroyed or consumed. He always has been and always will be compassionate, merciful, and full of unfailing love. He doesn’t blow His top or lose His cool.

According to the book of Malachi, and most of the prophets, we praise God for His unchanging character because that’s the opposite of us. We are wishy-washy: obedient today, rebellious tomorrow. God’s people showed great faith one day and turned around to worship idols another—just like we do today. There’s nothing new under the sun.

Voice a prayer of praise to the Lord, acknowledging Him for being unchanging and why that’s wonderful.

DAY 3

READ:

Malachi 3:7-12

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Malachi 3:7

NOTES

If reading this passage for the first time, it might seem God was deflecting the question He was being asked. In verse 7, He invited the Jews, “Return to me, and I will return to you.” The Jews, in their typical-for-the-book-of-Malachi, snide-comment-type of question, asked, “How can we return?” God almost seemed to ignore this and changed the conversation into one about robbing Him.

But upon looking at this passage more slowly and more reflectively, you may find that this line of questioning is not avoiding the topic but instead revealing it. God had already invited His people to return to Him over and over, with clear instructions (see Isaiah 44:22; Jeremiah 4:1; 24:7). God’s invitation to return always involves obedience and a humble heart.

So when the people ask how to return to God, He first lets them know how they left Him: in disobedience. God had made it quite clear what was expected of them in the sacrifices (see Leviticus 1:3-9), and through blatant disregard these expectations (see Malachi 1:6-14), they were robbing God and turning away. Disobedience is the same as leaving God.

Which is why the offer stands: “Return to me, and I will return to you.” This was an open offer for the Jews centuries ago, and it is still open for believers who have chosen disobedience: Return. Come back. Walk that path of obedience. If it seems like too much, throw the cares of the burden upon Jesus, who walks beside us and helps bear the burden (Matthew 11:28-30). Love God, love others as yourself (Matthew 22:36-40), and return to God.

Where have you wandered from God? To what obedience is He calling you today?

DAY 4

READ:

Malachi 3:13-18

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Malachi 3:16-18

NOTES

Throughout the history of God's people, there has always been those who feared God and those who didn't, those who followed in His ways and those who tried to go their own path, those who were obedient to God's Word and those who were disobedient.

In Malachi 3:13-15, God expressed that the people had been harsh in their words, and it almost seemed like there was no remnant of righteous people left in God's chosen nation. But then Malachi 3:16 shows us that there is always a remnant, "those who feared the LORD." There will always be two types of people: those who speak harsh words against the Lord, choosing to turn their backs on Him and believing that committing wickedness leads to prosperity, and those who fear the Lord, speaking faith to one another, whose names are written in a book of remembrance before the Lord.

There will always be a remnant because God promised Abraham that his descendants would multiply and through them the nations would be blessed (Genesis 22:17-18). There will always be people who are truly following the Lord and His ways (Matthew 7:13).

In Malachi, we see that there can be two very different situations occurring concurrently: both rebellion and faith at the same time, both obedience and harsh words at the same time. Even within the same body of believers, two situations can exist at one time. And God was not overwhelmed; He didn't miss a thing. He heard every harsh word of the rebels as He cherished every faithful word of those who feared Him.

This gives us hope that God will always be for His people and He will always fulfill His promises and accomplish His mission to grow His family and kingdom.

Do you feel overwhelmed at this time with the wickedness of the world or the apathy of some church-goers? Pour out your heart to the Lord, who is in control and knows His true followers.

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

"The remarkable thing about fearing God is that when you fear God you fear nothing else, whereas if you do not fear God you fear everything else."¹

—Oswald Chambers
(1874-1917)

DAY 5

READ:

Psalm 103

FOCAL PASSAGE:

Psalm 103:8

NOTES

God has compassion on us. He knows we are like His first human creation, Adam, made of dust (Psalm 103:14). And even when we are grown up and strong and paying our own bills and feeling like we just might conquer our corner of the world, He knows we're still human, helpless and dependent upon Him for our next meal, our next step, and our next breath.

As humans, we fall short. We fail. We try to do things our own way. Like a child who thinks she knows better than her parent, we are disobedient, wanting immediate gratification.

But this is not new to God. He knows who we are. From birth to death, He sees all our goodness and all our wickedness.

In that Fatherly knowledge, the Lord is compassionate and slow to anger. He's faithful in His love for us. He knows we're just a bigger, smarter version of the tiny child we were who entered the world many years earlier, still made of dust, still desperately in need of everything He gives us, especially His grace and forgiveness and love. That's the compassion of God.

He saw our first day, and He sees our last. He loves us, each and every breath. Even knowing we fall into wicked ways, He provided a way for us to escape judgment, punishment, and death. He is always for us for we are His children. And so, He will do anything and everything in His power to save and rescue us, even sending His only Son to die for us. That is compassion, that is grace, and that is faithful love.

When was the last time you thanked God for His compassion and love? Do so now.

GROUP

NOTES

VOICES from CHURCH HISTORY

“You little think how much the life of all your graces, and the happiness of your souls doth depend upon your ready and cordial obedience to the Spirit. When the Spirit urgeth thee to secret prayer, and thou refuseth obedience; when he forbids thee thy known transgressions, and yet thou wilt go on; when he telleth thee which is the way, and which not, and thou wilt not regard; no wonder if heaven and thy soul be strange. If thou wilt not follow the Spirit while it would draw thee to Christ, and to thy duty; how should it lead thee to heaven, and bring thy heart into the presence of God?”²

—Richard Baxter (1615-1691)

POINT 1: The sins of the wicked incur their guilt (Mal. 3:7-12; Jas. 2:10-11).

ESSENTIAL DOCTRINE #45: GUILT AND SHAME

Guilt refers to the objective status of someone being found guilty for a _____ committed as well as the incurring of _____ that comes with it (Matthew 5:21-22; James 2:10). Shame is the _____ pain that comes from sinful actions. Scripture teaches that human beings are guilty in an objective sense and also feel the weight of shame in a subjective sense.



How does God use guilt and shame to draw us back to Himself?

We all fall short and are _____ of breaking God’s law, whether in big or small ways. Therefore, we are deserving of God’s _____ .

POINT 2: The boasting of the wicked reveals their shamelessness (Mal. 3:13-15).

Harsh words against God, _____ and _____ , reveal our _____ of faith and respect for the Lord.



What are some examples of harsh words we might be guilty of speaking against the Lord?

When we complain, we _____ the wickedness in our heart. Our lack of _____ at complaining against God points to a lack of faith.

POINT 3: The fear of the Lord among the righteous prompts His compassion
(Mal. 3:16-18).

Even when God's people seem faithless, there will always be a group who _____ Him. God _____ them and _____ them.

? What are some ways we should speak to one another as those who fear the Lord?

Those who fear the Lord find _____ in His promises, experience His _____, and _____ with righteousness.

? Seeing how spiritual disciplines helped the Israelites in this volume to act with righteousness, how can these disciplines help us to fear and serve the Lord?

MY RESPONSE

Because all of our sin is forgiven in Christ, we seek to move from the shame we feel when we sin to delighting in our full acceptance in Christ Jesus.

- **HEAD:** How do you normally handle shame? Through what you've learned today, what should you do?
- **HEART:** What struggles to agree with God's authority and commands in your life will you confess to Him today?
- **HANDS:** What people do you know who seem burdened by their sin? How will you use this week's Scriptures to pray for them and speak to them about salvation through faith in Jesus Christ?

NOTES

VOICES from THE CHURCH

"Let's return to our Creator, our author. We were made for him and by him, and we're called to live in relationship with him. You and I will never thrive merely as who we are; we must know and live from the truth of whose we are."³

—Jen Oshman

FOOD FOR THE SOUL

by Daniel Davis

If you are a parent, perhaps you know the frustration of a child who won't eat her dinner. She just stares at it, plays with it, complains about it, and resists it with every fiber of her being, all while you chow down on a perfectly good and tasty meal, or at least one in which you've invested some time.

Or perhaps you know the child who won't drink from a sippy cup when you are trying to transition out of the bottle stage. Again with the staring, the crying, the pursed lips, and the sideways shifting head. For all our machinations, bargaining, threatening, or shaming, you can lead a child to the cup, but you can't make him drink.

FEED THE BODY

Why are these scenarios so frustrating in the life of a parent? Beyond the sinful nature of our own hearts to take offense where we shouldn't, I believe we struggle in these moments because we know that, barring allergies, the plate of food and the cup of milk are necessary for our children to grow. The body needs nourishment; without it, we languish, deteriorate, and die.

The advice most give to such struggling parents is patience—a child won't starve himself to death. Eventually, the growling of an empty belly will overpower the stubborn will of a resistant child. They will eat; they will drink—it just may take some time.

FEED THE SOUL

So according to common wisdom, a child won't starve himself or herself to death physically. But it sure seems we human beings of all ages can intend to starve ourselves spiritually.

Hebrews 5:11-14 says:

We have a great deal to say about this, and it is difficult to explain, since you have become too lazy to understand. Although by this time you ought to be teachers, you need someone to teach you the basic principles of God's revelation again. You need milk, not solid food. Now everyone who lives on milk is inexperienced with the message about righteousness, because he is an infant. But solid food is for the mature—for those whose senses have been trained to distinguish between good and evil.

If we do not partake
of the food of
the Word of God—
whether milk or
meat—we will gain
no nourishment,
we will languish,
deteriorate, and die.

The message, God's revelation—God's Word—is nourishment for our souls. As we begin the life of faith, we need the milk, basic teachings about God, Jesus, the Holy Spirit, sin, the gospel, salvation, and the church. We need to know that God created everything, that we are rebellious sinners deserving death and hell, that Jesus died on the cross for our sins and rose again to give us eternal life, and that one day He will return for His followers and make everything right in the world.

But as we grow in the faith, we expect to transition to solid food—to deeper studies of Scripture, doctrine, the Trinity, obedience, and evangelism. To be clear, this doesn't mean we leave the basics behind; rather, we go deeper into them. But if we do not partake of the food of the Word of God—whether milk or meat—we will gain no nourishment, we will languish, we will deteriorate, and we will die.

FEAST UPON THE WORD OF GOD

How stubborn we can be to ignore an empty soul begging to be fed even scraps of God's Word. In places around the world where the Bible is being translated for the first time, believers will devour the scant pages inscribed with the blessing of God's inspired revelation. From their lack of access to God's Word, they know firsthand the joy of poring over His words and feeding themselves.

So instead of apathy, instead of resisting, "taste and see that the LORD is good" (Psalm 34:8). God's Word is "sweeter than honey dripping from a honeycomb" (Psalm 19:10). Scripture teaches, trains, fills, and satisfies. So here's the point—we will not grow without feasting on the Word of God. "Man must not live on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matthew 4:4). And if you believe that, then open your mouth and take a bite.

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