

When You Think No One Is Watching  
Malachi 1:6-14  
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Whether or not you want to believe it, you've probably been caught on video doing something you'd rather that other people not see. Maybe it was a hidden camera prank someone played on you. Maybe it was that illegal u-turn you made now caught on a traffic camera. Maybe it was that time you picked your nose while waiting for your money to come out at the automatic teller. Yep, that's all recorded somewhere. Maybe that is you that the entire staff of the security company is laughing at gathered around a computer screen somewhere after one of the employees has been reviewing a security tape. You probably don't even know what you did to embarrass yourself. But someone somewhere is having a good laugh at your expense. And it is only going to get worse, with more and more cameras being installed in public places. As yet, there are no recording devices for the human brain, so there are still certain things you will be able to keep hidden, but everything else will be caught on tape somewhere.

You get the sense reading the book of Malachi that the Israelite priests have just been caught on video doing something naughty but they don't know they've been recorded, and so they are trying to get out of it by asking these silly questions, the kind kids make when they've been busted doing something wrong. When accused of being disrespectful of God, they say, "How have we despised your

name?” When accused of defiling the altar in the Temple, they “innocently” ask, “How have we polluted it?” Caught on video, so to speak, they say, “What a weariness this is” to make true offerings to God, not knowing that they’ve been seen and that the prophet Malachi is going to share that embarrassing moment with the whole world. God says, “You sniff at me,” and we can imagine them blushing at the thought that throughout history, millions of other people will see them in their most unflattering moment, the one in which they were caught dissing the most high God.

It is, of course a far graver offense to offer impure sacrifices in the temple than to pick your nose when you think no one is watching, but you don’t really want to get caught doing either, now do you? In the scriptural case, what makes the whole thing worse is that it is not just anyone bringing less than perfect animals to offer to God, but it is the priests, the ones who ought to know better, who ought to have a keener sense that God was present in that place, since the temple was, after all, considered God’s very house, and they were that house’s attendants. These were the people who were supposed to help other people be holy in God’s presence, but here they are falling down on the job. A little later in Malachi, they are charged with the following crime: “For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way; you have

caused many to stumble by your instruction; you have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts.” All of this when they should have known better.

And so they are in for some condemnation from God through the prophet Malachi, whose very name means, “my messenger.” Who were these ignorant priests and why were they being naughty? Well, you will remember that after all the unheeded warnings the prophets Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel and all the rest gave for the people to shape up, Jerusalem was overtaken by King Nebuchadnezzar, and its people carted off to Babylon, exiled to a strange land far from home. For decades they longed for home, dreamed of their return, and then finally it happened: the King of Persia decreed they could return, and thousands did. They came back, and marched up the hill to the Jerusalem of their memories and stories, and were probably disillusioned by what they saw, perhaps expecting God to have prepared everything for them in advance, as if they were long-awaited guests on a journey rather than people responsible for picking up the pieces of their own failures, for rebuilding a ruined city. And so they settled in and began to make ends meet. Beginning again from scratch, it was difficult. They were not thriving, as they had expected, just surviving. There was no infrastructure. There was no security. And so they began to wonder, more and more each day, “Well, is God really in this with us? Sure we are free, but I don’t see much happening that suggests God is still with us.” And even after they had rebuilt the Temple and rebuilt the walls of the Jerusalem, even after a hundred years had passed since their

return, still the doubts lingered about the presence of the Lord, and their diligence to God began to waver once again, their lax practices betraying their doubting and hopeless hearts.

Part of the reason for their hopelessness was because they had misinterpreted the signs of their times. You see, they remembered the prophet Ezekiel's vision, how the glory of the Lord departed Jerusalem and headed east, as the Babylonian forces were gathering to conquer the city of their forefathers. But they remembered too Ezekiel's vision of the future return of God's glory to the city and to the temple, and they were likely expecting its return to accompany their return, but that was because they were still wrong after all these years in exile. You see, the glory of the Lord is not about the people themselves, the human beings who inhabit a land, no matter how chosen they may be, but about a righteous, holy people. The glory of the Lord left not because the people themselves had left, had departed the city, but because the people had left behind the righteousness and the justice God had expected of them. And yet, it was not righteousness and justice they pursued upon their return, but rather their own well-being. And so it is no wonder that they were still waiting for the return of the glory of the Lord, and perhaps thinking that God was off dealing with other business. But for whatever reason, their devotion had become a little lax, a sort of religious "While the cat's away, the mice will play" sort of attitude. They probably figured, well, if God isn't around to see me, I can probably get away with just about anything. And so they did.

Let's look for a moment more specifically at what they did wrong, to see if it can't be instructive for us about what to do right. In those days, the worship of God centered around making offerings of animals or birds or agricultural products in the temple. The people would bring or buy these animals and foodstuffs and they would be slaughtered and burned at the altar by the priests, and the odor, it was thought, was pleasing to God, as was the act of devotion of the people and their priest. They were called, of course, to bring not just any animal or grain, but the best animal from their flock, and the best grain from the harvest. The idea was that the offering should mean something, that it should hurt a little economically, enough to make you conscious of where it all came from in the first place. God didn't ask for ninety percent, just for ten percent, but the price of that discount was that it was your best ten percent, not what you would throw away anyway. The temple was not to be confused with the landfill. The best of your flock was the fattest one, the one without any kind of blemish, the one that would win the blue ribbon at the county fair, not the blind one or the lame one or the sick one you couldn't sell even to someone with a weakness for stray animals. That's what the priests were doing. They were accepting for sacrifice, or encouraging people to bring for sacrifice, less than perfect offerings to God. They were shortchanging God, believing ignorantly, that somehow God was not watching.

It will not surprise you when I ask you to consider whether we still do the same today. I don't mean necessarily in the offering plate, whether what you give

is the first fruits of your paycheck, an offering made with crisp new bills you just pulled out of the ATM without picking your nose while waiting for them. You can give slightly used bills; we will accept them gladly. Yes, your stewardship is important, and God is watching, but that is not where it ends. That is where it begins. You see, what you offer to God is so much more than what you give to the church. I said earlier that God only asks of us ten percent, and that is true as far as the offering plate is concerned, but God asks one hundred percent of our lives and our commitment and our loyalty and our righteousness, even when we think no one is watching. We don't, or at least we shouldn't, offer that 100% because we think someone might be watching, but simply because we recognize God's grace and providence in our lives, because we are grateful for life and love and all the blessings God has rained down upon us. I don't think God desires the offerings of our hearts to be made under threat of punishment, but in the light of the hope of the Gospel's promises.

On the other hand, we probably should be offering ourselves as if we are being watched, because the truth is that we are, by children and grandchildren, eager to learn from us about everything, including how we worship God, both on Sunday, and during the rest of the week. We are being watched by friends and co-workers suspicious of Christians because they have seen too many hypocrites down through the years, too many people giving lip service to the need to make sacrifices to God, but in their own lives offering up only blemished treasures. We

are being watched by politicians and pollsters eager to see what they can get away with on the basis of what we think we can get away with. Our public officials are only as corrupt as those who elect them. We are being watched by one another, so that we can either feel better about ourselves and justify what little we give of ourselves – “Well, at least I give more than they do” – or to be encouraged and challenged and inspired – “Wow, look what she is doing!” There are no cameras recording what all these people see when they watch us, but all that information gets stored somewhere, in their brains, in their psyches, in their souls, and it gets used to decide for righteousness, for faith, or for devotion. Or for cynicism, despair, or injustice.

I don't want to belabour the point, but neither do I want to leave it too abstract. Are you paying your taxes, or looking for loopholes? Are you using company time for personal business? Are you giving your family your best minutes and hours of each day, or just what is left over after you've exhausted yourself at work? Are you faithfully living into your call to be salt and light in the world, or afraid to bring your light out from under that bushel basket for fear of being ridiculed? Would you open your checkbook and the hard drive of your computer to the scrutiny of others?

The people of Malachi's time may have had reason to believe God was not watching, maybe even to believe that God has abandoned them, but that does not excuse them. They may have thought, in the “absence” of God, what will it matter

if I don't give it my best? But we can be under no such illusion, having heard what God does think about that way of responding to God's grace. Sometimes you feel the love and sometimes you don't. But at all times, we must remember, as God spoke through Malachi, "For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name is great among the nations" and act accordingly, even if no one is watching. Amen.