

Reading: Malachi 3:6-12

Theme: A love problem?

I guess most of us have heard the term “*to sail the 7 seas*” - I wondered what are the 7 seas? I Googled it and I found it is mentioned in ancient writings, discovered the current thought, also what modern mariners and mapmakers thought! Basically, it means all the seas and oceans. Let’s look at the verses we read and use 7 headings to look at them, each beginning with Cs – so 7Cs!

1. Changeless. (v6)

This v6 has a division of opinion about it – should it be part of the section the NIV breaks at v5, or does it start a new section? It can be seen as a verse to end the earlier section, where the people had questioned “*Where is the God of justice?*” (v17b) –for in the verses following that, the Lord shows He will work and judge and the section ends at v6 – the Lord does not change.

Others say it starts this new section, as in NIV, where the Lord says and challenges the people that He does not change, even though they felt the God of former days, His standards and requirements could be downplayed and ignored - as He had gone soft in His old age! I’m going along with NIV division – a new topic.

Here in v6 the Lord states the truth of His changelessness, His immutability. All things change, all things are affected by time, events, circumstances, but not the Lord. He does not change in His being, His character, His strength, His plans, His purposes, His faithfulness, His standards etc. There is no shadow of changing with Him. God is totally unlike His any part of His creation - especially people. Could we imagine what this universe would be like if God was forever changing His mind, purposes, plans and standards? We would have nothing fixed or certain. Thankfully, God does not change, neither does His universal laws and moral standards - they

are the same as they ever were, as is His love, mercy, grace, holiness, power...

The Lord was unchanging in His plans and purposes for the Jews - here called descendants of Jacob - Jacob was the schemer, the liar, the cheating one of Isaac's children. Thankfully God's changeless purposes and plans meant they had not been destroyed, even when many other nations had been destroyed by Babylon. Despite their captivity and exile, due to God's changeless plans and purposes, the Jews were still an identifiable nation, even after both the Egyptian and Babylonian captivities. Even while in each, the Lord remembered His covenant purposes to them and they were delivered.

The changelessness of the Lord should be a help and comfort to us, but it should not cause us to presume on Him and His mercy, as He is also changeless in His standards, justice and holiness. His changelessness can be a good thing to consider, but, as with the Jews it also:

2. Confronts. (v7a)

A children's joke - a boy at a railway station said to the person in the ticket office *"I'd like a return please."* *"Where to?"* *"Back here!"* God is going to call the people to return to Him (v7b) - this means they are separated, away from each other. The Lord here confronts the people who have gone away from Him and His ways. If you go to Hull you will find the Wilberforce Museum and learn graphically of his fight against slavery. You can read of slaves running away to get away from cruel masters. Yet here the Lord was **not** a cruel master - His ways and decrees were for the good of His people, indeed all people and yet Malachi's generation and previous generations had left, gone away, turned away from God and His decrees, ordinances and commands - they had not kept them! It wasn't as if He kept changing His mind and adding new ones, then altering them. His decrees were constant, were changeless and here

He confronts the people with their persistent failure to keep His changeless ways.

What of us? Are we sidestepping God's laws? Do we justify our thoughts, lifestyle, behaviour and way of living by a convenient ignoring or avoidance of God's laws and demands? What about someone here who has heard the gospel many times, do you have a perverse reasoning which allows you to conveniently ignore the demands of Jesus on and in your life? What about anyone here who is a backsliding, cold-hearted, indifferent believer - what do you give us a justifiable reason to be like that and to keep on remaining so? Where are we as believers and our lives? How would we possibly justify prayerlessness, indifference, apathy, or even casualness in the things of God? Malachi doesn't let any of us off in this challenge, but he would cause us to examine our lives before the Lord God Almighty.

You may be thinking or feeling "*Typical OT God - hard, rigid and immovable!*" Just a moment, please do not mistake changeless and immutable with immovableness and hardness, for we see God also has a changeless loving heart and this is underlined in:

3. Calling. (v7b)

At this point the Lord shows Himself not as some cold, hard and heartless Potentate, who grudgingly will accept His people, but we are shown He is the God who delights in calling and welcoming His people back to Him. So much so, that as He sees them moving towards Him, He quickly and lovingly goes to them and promises to return to them. He sees them while they're a long way off and goes to welcome them - as portrayed in parable of the prodigal son. Matthew Henry wrote "*Note, God takes notice what returns our hearts make to the calls of His word, what we say and what we think when we have heard a sermon, what answer we give to the message*

sent us.” Return with repentance and in confidence to God for He will return to us in grace!

What is our response to His message this evening, to the calls He has made to us over the past weeks, months and even years? Will we, if we are a backslidden Christian return to Him - the Lover of our soul? He has not abandoned us, but we have abandoned Him and He calls to us in His word even this evening for us to return. Will we? Those who have heard the gospel so often, even from your childhood, will you come to this God as your God and Saviour or will you go on ignoring, rejecting even despising the call of this Saviour to you?

The Lord called so tenderly to these hard-hearted people of Malachi’s day. He is doing so to us in this message, in other messages, in all we know of Him and all His goodness to us. It is been said that God speaks to us in all the situations of life, but in the storms and disasters He SHOUTS to us! If we do not listen to His quiet call, He may have to shout at and to us in His dark providences. I pray we would listen to the voice of Jesus softly pleading with our hearts, even this evening. We further see in these verses:

4. Charging. (v8)

The words of this verse are quite startling as the people are charged with robbing God! They naturally question “*How have we robbed God?*” What if God were to charge us with that this evening? Yet God’s word comes to us, to cause us to honestly and seriously examine our lives, even as believers, to see if we are guilty of this awesome and awful crime of robbing God! From time to time there are news items about a man or woman who have fooled and conned, robbed their old mother or father of their life savings!

The people asked how they were to return and it was by realising the wrong they had done, were doing and repent of it, then to seek to do the right. Here the Lord brings the charge of robbery against them.

He had already accused them of many things against Him, - contempt, indifference, treachery, wrong divorces, wrong marriages, idolatry, lying, questioning God, sorcery, oppression... Here it is this vile crime of robbing God and the people were startled! For they were so religious, so nice, suffering so much in hard times - how on earth could they, the people of God, with the priests, the Levites, the Temple and the sacrifices all in place, how could they rob God?

The charge was made and then the evidence was given! Let's briefly consider the evidence. As we do so, we will have to question if we are robbing God and this charge is applicable to our own lives! Please believe me when I say that this is not a fundraising exercise for the church, nor is it a 'get at' type sermon. I am well aware of the generous and liberal giving of many in the church and I'm constantly amazed at the Lord's gracious provision through the giving of His people here. What I want the word of God to do is to examine us all as to whether or not are we personally giving aright, with right motives and out of love to the Lord? The amount and regularity are irrelevant - unless we know we are selfishly not giving as we should or could.

The Lord said through Malachi that these astonished people were robbing Him as a nation in tithes and offerings. 'Tithe' is not a word we often use now, but in OT a tithe was a tenth of your produce i.e. whether it be crops, fruit, animals or money. There were various tithes of this, that and the other and they were usually given to the Levites, who then tithed to the priests also (Leviticus 27:30-32; Numbers 18:26-28; Deuteronomy 14:28-29 - *which also included provision for orphans and widows.*) Then **on top of those tithes** were necessary offerings at various sacrifices, feasts etc. and then also voluntary offerings on top of these! We saw the careless way freewill offerings were being sloppily given in 1:7-8.

Here the Lord is saying that failure to do as they should have, was equal to robbing God. These offerings were given as to the Lord directly, but were to be given to and used by the priests and the Levites for their sustenance, the maintenance of themselves and their families and the temple. Yes, we know the priests and Levites were a pretty ropey lot in Malachi's day, that the people had every reason not to give because of the character of the priests and the Levites. They may have thought or argued "*How can we rob God - He has everything; all is His, even all we have!*" (A super-spiritual argument!?) Even though all their money and possessions ultimately belong to God, yet even that which was given over in tithes and offerings was not being given and used in a truly God honouring way - to further and maintain God's ordained work. The people failed realise that if they were not giving to and at the temple, the Lord viewed it as not being given to Him and therefore they were robbing Him of what He had commanded! They forgot He had not changed - nor had His commands.

The reason the people were not giving was because of a heart problem - their hearts made their hands clench and hang onto their money and it caused them to view that God and His work were not worth giving to. This was not so much a financial problem as a love, a heart problem - they didn't love God enough to give to His work in the way He had said. What about us? Are we robbing God? It is possible for us to be robbing God! As to our level of giving, it is not the wisest matter for a pastor to preach on such in his own church, but I know you well enough and I hope you know me well enough so that I'm able to speak on this verse without being accused of any ulterior motives.

Many here believe that the principle of the tithing is a good one for NT believers. I do not legislate, demand or even insist on it. If in OT this was the floor from which to start and then have added to it the fixed and voluntary offerings, then in NT times, surely wouldn't we

do well to have this same principle? This is a good rule of thumb and not some sort of mechanical and legalistic thing as we work out things out down to the last penny, even questioning if it's to be before or after tax! If we did so, we could become modern day Pharisees and end up tithing mint and herbs as they did! As NT Christians, we are called upon to present, to give our bodies as living sacrifices – to consciously own that all we are and have is God's.

Thankfully our God is not a hard task master, and He doesn't sit there with an account book, but in the light of all He has done, is doing for us and all He will do for us, can we really hold back anything from Him? Yet, our giving may reflect our love or lack of such. Wesley said *"It's not how much of my money do I give to the Lord, but how much of the Lord's money do I keep for me!"* We read of a rich man putting in money in the temple out of his wealth - no problem, but done for show so that others would know he did it. We are to beware of that. But the Lord Jesus at that time saw a poor widow putting in just 2 mites (2 small insignificant coins) yet she gave more than the rich man, as out of her love she sacrificed. One commentator said *"If one tenth of our income is not a sacrifice, then we are robbing God. We should give to God in such a way that we feel the pinch."* Ouch! That hurts and challenges me! What about our response? We need wisdom as we are stewards of all our money and possessions, the Lord's money is to be set aside first and not what is left over - which seems to be the principle Paul gives in 1 Corinthians 16:2 – *"On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with his income, saving it up, so that when I come no collections will have to be made."*

Yet it is not just about money, as OT giving was of crops and herds. It does not mean the treasurer wants plants, rabbits etc. We are in a different time and culture. Often our most precious thing is time. I read of one preacher who said that the best way for a husband to let his wife know he loved her was to **waste time** with her in going

shopping or something! (*I didn't say it I'm only passing it on!*) The point being that with time so precious, if we use it with and on another person, then surely, they must be precious to us! Are we spending time with the Lord, or do we rob Him of it by failing to read the Bible, pray, spend time with other believers in a meeting where we can all spend time seeking Him, praising, praying and delighting in Him?

Do we give our best time and effort to God or are we robbing Him by giving any old thing - the blind, the lame, the no-good moments? These are big questions and carry serious charges with them. Do we realise that if we are not careful, we also can rob God in ways we'd be shocked to consider?

I will end there this evening and will see the rest of the 7Cs next time and we will note:

5. Cursing (v9) - serious dangers in remaining a robber!
6. Challenging (v10-11) - God calls on us to test Him to prove His word!
7. Comforting (v12) - why it is worth testing God!

I pray the Lord has been speaking to us all, or even started speaking to us and if so, we should take that as an encouragement that He is not finished with us, but wants us to go on with Him in a growing love relationship.