

**11/9/25 Be Careful What You Wish For – God’s Justice Malachi 2:17–3:5**  
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Can you think of a time when you got exactly what you asked or hoped for—but it didn’t turn out quite the way you imagined? What did you learn from that experience? There’s a saying that goes back at least to ancient Greece and Aesop’s fables: “**Be careful what you wish for.**” Many songs echo the same warning. It reminds us that a desire, once granted, can have unexpected consequences that make the outcome less desirable than we imagined.

An example in the Bible is found in **1 Samuel 8**. The people of Israel approached the prophet Samuel and demanded a king to “*judge us and go out before us and fight our battles,*” so they could be “*like all the other nations.*” They thought a visible, human king would provide leadership and security. They believed this would solve their problems. God instructed Samuel to grant their request, but warned them of the cost. The king would take their sons for his army, their daughters for his service, and a tenth of their flocks and harvests. The one they hoped would secure their freedom would impose heavy burdens, leading them away from reliance on God as their true King.

The saying “be careful what you wish for” is a warning that getting what you want might be harder to deal with than you thought. It’s wise to consider the implications before wishing or asking for something.

In today’s passage from Malachi, the people are wishing for something, too—but they don’t truly realize what they’re asking. They cry out, “***Where is the God of justice?***” thinking they want divine intervention, not realizing **that justice will begin with them**. Listen for their question and for God’s response. ***Malachi 2:17–3:5 (NRSV)***

“You have **wearied the Lord** with your words. Yet you say, ‘*How have we wearied him?*’ By saying, ‘***All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.***’ Or by asking, ‘***Where is the God of justice?***’ See, I am sending **my messenger** to prepare the way before me, and the Lord whom you seek **will suddenly come** to his temple. **The messenger** of the covenant in whom you delight—indeed, he is coming, says the Lord of hosts. But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he appears? For he is like a refiner’s fire and like

fullers' soap; he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the descendants of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, until they present offerings to the Lord in righteousness. Then the offering of Judah and Jerusalem will be pleasing to the Lord as in the days of old and as in former years. **Then I will draw near to you for judgment; I will be swift** to bear witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me, says the Lord of hosts.”

In Malachi's day, God's people were weary and cynical. They looked around and concluded that the wicked prospered while the righteous suffered. Their cry “*Where is the God of justice?*” was both a lament and an accusation. It's a question some of us are still asking today. But God's response through the prophet is sobering. Justice will come, but not as they expect. Before God brings judgment, God brings purification. Like a refiner's fire or fuller's soap, God's justice begins by cleansing God's own people. The delay in judgment is not evidence of indifference; it's an act of mercy, giving time for hearts and lives to be refined before the day of reckoning.

One of the fascinating things about Scripture is how it holds tension. ***Isaiah 40:28*** declares, “*The Lord is the everlasting God... He does not faint or grow weary*”; yet, here in Malachi, we read, “***You have wearied the Lord with your words.***” What a thought—that we could weary the Lord with our words! God is not weak, but God is grieved when people twist God's character or accuse God of injustice.

They weary the Lord in two ways. First, by saying, “*All who do evil are good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them.*” That's moral confusion—calling evil good and good evil. It's the kind of spiritual blindness that rationalizes sin, and it still happens today when people seek to justify behavior that God clearly condemns. Second, they weary the Lord by asking, “*Where is the God of justice?*” as if God's silence means God is absent. But God replies, “I will suddenly come.” The problem is not whether God will act, but whether we are ready for God's justice to begin with us.

This passage speaks to three movements: Justice, Purification, and Preparation. When I was talking with our son, Nathan, this week, and shared that I was preaching about God's justice, he said to me that I had to be clear about what I meant by justice, because in his words, “Gardeners and dermatologists both talk about removing moles—

but they're not talking about the same thing." Likewise, our culture and Scripture often use the same word but mean different things.

The idea of justice runs all through the Bible. The Hebrew word *mishpat*, which is often translated as justice, appears more than four hundred times in the Old Testament, showing that this isn't a side topic—it's central to who God is. **Mishpat** is a rich word meaning not only justice, but fair treatment, legal proceedings, restoration, and a way of life. In the Bible, justice means that people are treated impartially, fairly, and rightly—by both the law and those who uphold it. It means laws protect people from harm and, when harm occurs, they help make things right. Justice ensures that both accuser and accused receive what's fair in the eyes of God.

Justice reflects God's own character. *Psalm 89:14* says, "**Righteousness and justice are the foundation of your throne.**" Justice is not just something God does; it's part of who God is. And because that's true, justice is something God requires of God's people. Repeatedly, the prophets remind Israel—and us—that true worship must be joined with justice: caring for the poor, the widow, the orphan, the foreigner, and the oppressed. Jesus carries that same theme forward, lifting the lowly, confronting systems of oppression, and calling us to love our neighbor as ourselves.

Justice in Scripture is not only about punishment; it's about restoration—making wrong things right. It's both **retributive**, addressing wrongdoing, and **restorative**, healing what's been broken. Justice calls us not just to avoid doing harm, but to actively do good—to speak up for those without a voice, to protect the vulnerable, and to build communities where everyone can flourish.

Justice reflects God's character. It's for everyone. It demands honesty and impartiality in our dealings. It requires integrity in how we treat others, no matter their status, wealth, or background. I had a great conversation this week with Jeremiah Pranga, who is working for an attorney, and I'm so proud of how he is trying to serve and represent people in this way, regardless of their status in society. Justice is our calling as God's people—to live out God's righteousness in everyday life. The laws of gleaning, in *Leviticus 19*, remind us of this: God commanded harvesters to leave the edges of their fields uncut so the poor could gather food for themselves. Compassion was built right into the covenant laws of Israel and the structure of society. A just community feeds the hungry, cares for the vulnerable, and upholds the dignity of every person—

children, the elderly, people with disabilities, the alien, and the marginalized. When we fail to do that, Scripture says it is to our shame and we risk the judgment and wrath of God.

God's justice is sure—but it isn't always swift. Sometimes God delays judgment, and when God does, it's because of mercy. God has not changed; God is still just. But the Lord graciously delays judgment, so that we might be purified by God's refining work. Throughout the Bible, this pattern repeats: before judgment comes, there's purification—a time for repentance, refinement, and renewal. The delay is grace at work, giving us time to turn back, to be cleansed, to align our lives with God's ways.

Speaking of the Lord's messenger, and Malachi means "my messenger" (our son, Greg, told me this verse is like when they say the title of a movie in the movie), God asks, "*Who can endure the day of his coming?*" For he is like a refiner's fire and a launderer's soap. Before impurities are burned away, the fire must be kindled. Before the garment is clean, it must be scrubbed. God's justice begins not with punishment, but with purification. Purification, however, is never comfortable, just as the words of the prophets are rarely comfortable for us to hear. The refiner's fire burns away pride, greed, complacency, and indifference. When God delays judgment, God is giving us space to change—to repent, to restore, to make things right. God's goal is not destruction, but transformation.

And this refining and purification leads to **preparation**. God's people are called to prepare the way of the Lord—to ready our hearts and our communities for the Lord's coming. Preparation means aligning our lives with God's justice now, not later. As was demonstrated in the ministry of John the Baptist, justice involves actions, doing things like sharing what we have, not stealing, being generous. Justice isn't just saying we believe things, it involves taking just action.

The Bible, Jesus, and the early church all tell us that God's judgment will be measured by how we've treated the most vulnerable among us. In Isaiah, Jeremiah, and Amos, God rebukes nations not only for idolatry, but for neglecting justice—for trampling the poor and turning away from those in need. What do you think God would say about our nation right now? Sadly, as I stand here today, every branch of our federal government is guilty of neglecting the hungry and the poor. In Massachusetts, which is a prosperous commonwealth, one in six residents receives SNAP benefits to buy food.

SNAP stands for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. It's the largest anti-hunger program in the United States, providing monthly funds to help low-income individuals and families buy groceries.

In Brewster, a town of around 10,000 people, 748 received SNAP benefits in September. Our food pantry saw a record number of people on Thursday, and our volunteers were here for three hours. Wayne Johnston and his team are having a meeting at 9:30 am today to discuss food, funding, and process, because we're dealing with a scale of need much higher than usual, which is only going to grow until a resolution is reached. We have volunteers who serve at food pantries in Chatham and Harwich and with other feeding programs like Faith Family Kitchen, and everyone is seeing a surge of need. **86% of all SNAP benefits** go to households that include a child, elderly person, or a person with a disability. Regardless of one's politics, feeding hungry people, especially children, seniors, and people with disabilities, should be one of the easiest things for Americans, and certainly Christians, to agree on. There are so many verses, like *Isaiah 58:10*, "*if you offer your food to the hungry and satisfy the needs of the afflicted, then your light shall rise in the darkness and your gloom be like the noonday.*"

Our country is only helped by people having enough to eat. It makes for healthier, happier people, and businesses and American farmers all benefit, as well. In *Matthew 25*, in the judgment of the nations (*Matthew 25:32*), Jesus makes it plain: "*Whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.*" When God delays judgment, it's not a pause for comfort—it's a call to renewed faithfulness. It's a time for the Church and all Christ followers to be purified of self-interest, to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Justice also means accountability. Each of us stands before God—not only now, but at the final judgment. One day, the delay will end. Every hidden thing will be brought to light. Every injustice that went unanswered will be set right. Every tear shed by the innocent will be remembered. And the measure of our lives will not be wealth, comfort, or success—it will be how we reflected the justice and mercy of God in the time we were given.

God's justice is not distant or abstract—it's real and living, flowing from God's holiness and steadfast love. Though it may seem delayed, it's never denied. God is

patient, not wanting any to perish, but for all to come to repentance. God's patience is meant to move us—not to complacency, but to conviction.

While we wait for God's final judgment, we're called to live out God's justice here and now: to feed the hungry, welcome the stranger, defend the orphan, care for the widow, and stand with those who have been cast aside. Every act of mercy, every moment of integrity, every choice to do what is right, is a glimpse of God's kingdom breaking into this world. These acts are clearly needed in our time.

One day, God's justice will be complete. Every wrong will be made right. Every tear will be wiped away. The proud will be humbled, and the humble lifted. On that day, the fire of God's judgment will not destroy what is pure—it will reveal it. So, let's live as people of that coming kingdom—refined, purified, and prepared. May our lives testify that God's justice is not only a promise for someday, but a calling for today, because God's justice isn't only a truth to believe—it's a way to live. When we pray, "*Your kingdom come, your will be done,*" we're asking that God's justice begin in us. The refining fire of God purifies not just systems, but hearts, including ours.

What does it look like to "do justice" in everyday life? It starts close to home. To do justice is to speak the truth with love, to treat coworkers, neighbors, friends, and family with fairness and respect. It means noticing those who go unseen—the single parent, the lonely senior, the struggling student, and so many other types of people. It's choosing honesty when deceit is easier, generosity when it would be easier to keep, forgiveness when it would be easier to hold a grudge.

Doing justice also means standing with those who are vulnerable or mistreated. Malachi says God's judgment will be swift, "*against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired workers in their wages, the widow and the orphan, against those who thrust aside the alien, and do not fear me.*" We need to live like we truly believe that. We reflect God's heart when we use the influence we have—our words, our work, our time, our resources—to assist those who have been pushed down. Justice is not only public policy; it's personal discipleship. It's expressed in how we shop, how we speak, and how we serve. When God's people practice justice, the world catches a glimpse of God's kingdom. Our small acts of fairness, compassion, and courage become signs that divine justice is already at work—purifying, restoring, and making things new.

Malachi warns us to be careful what we wish for. When we ask for God's justice, are we ready for the Lord to begin that work in us, in our church, in our nation? God's justice is never separated from God's love, mercy, and desire to restore what is broken. Now is the time to prepare. Now is the time to seek purification. Now is the time to live out the justice of God—so that when God's kingdom comes in its fullness, we'll be ready.

**Blessing:** May the Lord refine and purify our hearts, strengthen our hands, and send us out to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with our God—until God's perfect justice fills the earth. Amen

### Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. What do you think it means to “weary the Lord” (*Malachi 2:17*)?
2. Why do you think God's justice is sometimes delayed?
3. What does it mean that God's justice begins with purification (the refiner's fire and fuller's soap)?
4. When we cry out for justice in the world, how can we also prepare our hearts for God's refining justice in us?
5. *Malachi 3:5* lists categories of injustice (sorcery, adultery, falsehood, exploitation, oppression). How are these forms of injustice still present in our society today—and how might the Church respond faithfully?
6. How does the justice of God revealed in Jesus (our advocate and defender) reshape our understanding of judgment?
7. In what ways have you desired justice for others but mercy for yourself? What might it look like to desire both for all people?