

THE BOOK OF MALACHI - When Spiritual Intimacy Feels Elusive - Pt 2

Sunday, October 30th, 2022, 5:30 p.m.

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GOD AWAITS OUR EMPHASIS

Malachi 1:6-14 - "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?' [7] By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we polluted you?' By saying that the Lord's table may be despised. [8] When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts. [9] And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the Lord of hosts. [10] Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. [11] For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. [12] But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. [13] But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord. [14] Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.

Given the kinds of sins that will be dealt with in this letter (marital infidelity, robbing God, divorce, etc) it's interesting to notice the first point at which God sees a need for repentance on the part of His people. Surprisingly, it centers around their **worship**. Their response to God's presence and life **religiously** takes priority over the list of failures in the area of their personal **morality**. I point that out because we're not at all used to that kind of emphasis. We stress the elements of **personal righteousness** and leave the approach to God in **worship** as a matter of personal taste and temperament. Today's text focuses on **sins of worship**.

It's also important to notice how this sin originated and how it grew and became malignant among the people. And the text bears witness to a **dual** condemnation from God. This is because, while the **people** committed the sin, the **priests** were really the ones who bore the first and primary guilt. It's a fascinating and highly relevant study in light of today's church scene.

- 1) **FIRST, LET'S LOOK AT SOME OF THE BACKGROUND OF THE SITUATION AS IT EXISTED IN JUDAH AT THAT TIME**

The people were back in their home city and temple, but with very little of their original wealth and prosperity. The land hadn't been farmed in years. They were starting all over again. They would have paid a heavy tax to the governor of Persia.

And it wasn't easy making ends meet. The crops were a little lean, the herds were smaller and thinner than before. All of this created a problem for their worship of God. God had always made it clear that when they went through their herds for the sacrificial slaughter victim, they were to pick the most **perfect** animal they could find.

To the farmers this made less and less sense. It wasn't too bad when the pastures were crammed with beautiful, healthy livestock. But it got increasingly hard to justify when **there were very few good, strong animals left**. Because those are the ones you want to keep and raise for breeding purposes - not slit and burn on some one shot religious ritual.

So the people brought what they felt was more realistic given the situation in which they functioned. It was just a matter of practical good-sense. It was easily explained and justified. Take note. This is how we almost always justify the early rationalizations of sin. It is always dangerous to evaluate our own approach to God in dedication and worship by our own sense of propriety and fitness.

But having said all this, God's real complaint is with the ***priests in the temple* - Malachi 1:6 - "son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?'"**

The priests found it increasingly difficult to uphold the Word of the Lord. The people weren't happy with the **cost** of obeying God. There was a great deal of pressure put on the priests to do things more in keeping with the desires of the people. Democracy seemed much more reasonable. And the priests were under a great deal of pressure to keep the people content and cooperative. After all, if the people didn't like what the priests were doing, they might find another God or another church. They might quit coming altogether.

What's more, the priests got a certain portion of all the meat and food that was offered to the

Lord. If the people stopped sacrificing, the priests would starve. They were caught in the middle of a very real, human situation.

And God very sternly takes them to task because they had given in to what was **expedient** and **sensitive to the people's desires** rather than what was **commanded** and what God said was simply **right**. The priests had **tailored a message** that was more in keeping with what would fit the times. That's a quick picture of the **problem**.

2) TWO TERRIBLE EVILS GREW OUT OF THIS SITUATION

A) GOD SAID THE PRIESTS WERE SHARING IN THE CONTEMPT THAT THE PEOPLE WERE SHOWING GOD

God said they were offering to Him what they wouldn't even give to the governor: **Malachi 1:8** - **"When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the Lord of hosts."**

Of course, the answer to those questions is an assumed **"No."** And the reason is simple. We wouldn't do something like that to a human governor because we'd be embarrassed - found out. There would be the shocked look on the governor's face - the obvious weight of a terrible breach of proper behavior. We couldn't live with ourselves because of the shame and rejection for our actions. People go to ridiculous lengths at events like wedding receptions to make sure all the guests don't leave feeling slighted or disappointed. But, says Malachi, the people weren't worried about offending God.

And here's the important point God makes. Incredibly, none of that happens when we slight God. He doesn't say anything - not out loud. Nobody else ever finds out because God doesn't tell. **So both the people and the priests cared more about a visible influence than an invisible one**. They were wounded at the thought of displeasing **men** far more than they were by the thought of displeasing **God**.

This is entering the realm of a huge theological principle. This has always been a massive

threat to spiritual life: **John 5:44** - "How can you believe, when you receive glory from one another and do not seek the glory that comes from the only God?"

Notice the drama in that opening question - "How can you believe....?" The answer is, **you can't**. This is something that makes a living relationship with Jesus impossible. So there's hope for crooked tax collectors, two sheckle prostitutes, and zealous cult members. But there's no hope offered for people who care about pleasing men more than God.

The desire to please God **first** - that desire - becomes the wings that get a person spiritually airborne. It's what helps a Christian to be a Christian when he has to stand all alone. Or when he's persecuted. Or tempted to compromise.

No wonder God, through Malachi, chides the spiritual leaders of his day. And it's a rebuke out of love. We **tend** to play up to the most **visible** influences. This cuts the throat of spiritual life.

B) SURPRISINGLY, THE PEOPLE WERE GETTING BORED WITH THEIR RELIGION

Malachi 1:11-13 - "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. [12] But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. [13] But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the Lord."

I said this boredom was a **surprising** boredom because one would think we would get the most happiness out of a religion over which we set the terms. But clearly, by the people's own admission, this was not the case. And we need to discover the reason **why**. I think we can see two things here:

First, the message of the Word of God was shaped to the tastes of the people by a faithless priesthood. The priests caved in to democratic pressure. The tastes of the seekers swayed the content of the message. The message of the living God is massaged into a slightly different shape to suit what seem to be the felt needs of the masses. But then something very unexpected happened:

Second, because the Word of God was bent out of shape - even just slightly - the presence and power of God evaporated from among His people. And here's the important bottom line thesis here. Even for people who don't **want** to obey God, **there's nothing more boring than religion with the Spirit of God drained out of it.**

The message here is a very old and time tested one. When religious people get their own way, even the escaping of God's will leaves them with nothing but emptiness and boredom. Joy can't be found in devotion to God on **your** terms. This is the deceptive nature of genuine, soul-satisfying joy. It can only be found in devotion on **His** terms.

3) **WHEN GOD WANTS A "FOR SALE" SIGN ON HIS CHURCH**

Malachi 1:10-11 - "*Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain!* I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand. [11] For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts."

Are those not incredible words? Don't mistake this for some pouty, temper tantrum on the part of Father God. It is better understood as a gesture of firm, fatherly love. "You priests ought to be concerned enough about the **glory of God** among the nations and the **spiritual correction of the people** to lock up the temple."

Why? Because their perverted offerings aren't being accepted anyway. Their prayers are a chronic waste of time. If the temple doors were locked they would have a more accurate picture of what has **already happened to their relationship with God. He's closed to them.** And an

awareness of this might press the people into repentance.

I hope you catch something of God's heart when He says, "***Don't you dare allow Me to be represented as some lifeless religious icon. I'd rather the temple be shut down than have people continue in some phoney religious ritual. I don't want to be represented that way - ever!***"

4) LET ME CLOSE WITH THE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUE OF THIS PASSAGE

We see people coming before the Lord on ***their terms*** rather than ***His***. By that I mean they think they can determine the ***extent*** of their commitment and the ***cost*** of their self-surrender. In the context of Malachi this manifested itself in this specific way - they came as God commanded. And they brought ***something*** as God required. And doing ***something*** always feels so much more righteous than doing ***nothing***.

And that's the deceptive part. Because they brought ***something***, even though not ***exactly*** what God ***required***, their neglect didn't bother them any more. They probably contented themselves in the fact that at least they did ***something***. And they could ***rest*** in their own worship even though it wasn't what God required. They came on terms that suited them - what was convenient - what they felt they could afford.

And God was furious with the priests for not making clear to the people that He ***doesn't take partial sacrifice*** from His people. Not because He ***doesn't*** love them, but because He ***does*** and knows their own religious ideas will never quench their thirsty hearts.

And He's insulted and broken-hearted that they can't put it together. They don't make the deduction that if He can deliver them from Babylon and rebuild their temple and their city, then He can be trusted to multiply their flocks if they sacrifice on His terms. And you and I can trust God when He tells us to tithe, to break off a godless relationship, or to step out in some ministry for which we feel inadequate in our own strength.

So the passage is fundamentally about ***worship***. It's about coming before God with a heart prepared for full obedience. It's coming to the Lord in a way that's pleasing to Him. And, bottom

line, it's about caring **more** about pleasing God than pleasing **anyone else**. And that does relate to us today. That's what we're doing here today. This building is set apart - like the temple was - for that purpose.

Let's reacquaint ourselves when something that has become all too familiar to us. ***I'm making a massive statement about my life whenever I walk into this church.*** And I'm making it to a God who knows whether or not I'm being truthful. True, I come on the basis of a totally different sacrifice - Jesus Christ's death on the cross - the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the whole world.

There are no other sacrifices being accepted by God today. But while the sacrifice is different, I am still saying the same thing when I come before Him. I'm saying, ***"You're my God. You have delivered me. I am your servant. My life is not my property. I've have made that kind of commitment to You and I am aware of it."*** This is what it means to worship God in Spirit and in ***truth.***

Listen, when I come into this sanctuary I am supposed to be telling God and everyone else present that ***"I renounce my right to all sin - private or public. I will do anything the Spirit tells me to do in order to walk in the light. There is no price too high - no sacrifice too great - no confession too embarrassing - no restoration too costly - no friendship too dear, but that if you speak, Lord, I will do as you bid."***