

Malachi 2: 1-16
(Matthew 5:27-32; Galatians 5:16-26)
“So Guard Yourselves in You Spirit and Do Not Be Faithless”

Introduction

This past week, you may have heard of the writer Anne Rice’s renunciation of her recent return to the church of her youth. She is renouncing the church and her Christian identity in order, she says, to follow Jesus. Christians she sees as contentious, disputatious, and unloving, nothing like the One whom we call Lord. “I’m leaving the church, not Christ,” she says. And her very public example is being followed by legions of Americans. The fastest growing religious group in America is the spiritually unaffiliated. Why? Where is the spiritual power and glory promised by Christ to his people?

Malachi addressed his warnings to people much like you and me. They believed that they had done what God required, and wondered why they had not experienced to a greater measure the reality of God’s promises. Where was his glory? The visible glory of God had been seen filling the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple of Solomon. His glory had departed during the exile of his people. But he had promised that when his people returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, his glory would again fill it. That visible glory was the sign both to Israel and her enemies that the living God dwelt in the midst of his people, that he would prosper and protect them. It was the visible sign of his love for them. The people of Malachi’s day had returned under Nehemiah and rebuilt the walls of Jerusalem. Under Ezra, they had rebuilt the temple. But this time, the glory of God had *not* returned and filled the temple. Those who were old enough to remember Solomon’s temple wept, realizing that the days of greatness were past, and the day of small things had come.

How many of us feel that way! We have read of the great things God has done in the past. Some of us are old enough to remember days of the presence of God so powerful that rooms where we worshiped were shaken. We have seen such things today in other countries and cultures where the Spirit of God is powerfully at work. We don’t know whether to laugh or weep at what today is called revival in our land. Here we are: we have built the sanctuary, sung the hymns, given our offerings. Where is the Lord? Why doesn’t he answer our cries? Why doesn’t he again enter his sanctuary in power and glory? When we call on him, why doesn’t he answer and show us great and mighty things?

Malachi’s answer to Israel, and the Spirit’s answer to us, is this: “I have loved you!” (1:2). The question is not whether God loves us, but whether we love him. If the *message* of Malachi is that God loves us, his *warning* is that we cannot experience the reality of God’s presence unless we cherish the reality of his presence.

In this second chapter before us this morning, Malachi continues to force us to look at ourselves, to realize that we are shaped by what we love most, and to come to grips with the fact that we have not loved the Lord above all other loves. He summarizes this by telling the priests that they have despised God's covenant with them. If this is for Israel's priests, why should we think it applies to us? Because under the New Covenant we are all called priests of God. Peter refers to Christians as "a chosen people, a royal priest hood" (1 Peter 2:9); and John refers to us as "a kingdom of priests unto our God" (Revelation 5:10). This is for each of us, and I believe that the Spirit of God wants to show us today that we are like the priests of Malachi's day in despising God's covenant with us, in our case the New Covenant that God sealed with the blood of his own Son. Three illustrations are given in our text of the ways that we have despised God's covenant of grace.

Body

1. We have not cherished *God's honor*.

In order to understand *how* we have failed to cherish God's honor, we need to understand exactly what it is that Malachi is referring to when he speaks of this "covenant of life and peace" (2:5). He is referring back to a period in the wilderness recorded in the book of Numbers, chapter 25, when the men of Israel began to "indulge in immorality with the Moabite women," and ended up by worshipping their gods. Moses was distressed, and called the people to repent. As the Spirit of God began to move in revival, the people began to break down and weep over their sin. In the midst of this scene of repentance and worship, a man named Zimri walked through the middle of the camp with a Midianite woman named Cozbi, and went into his tent to sleep with her. One of Aaron's grandsons, a priest named Phinehas, was so outraged for the sake of God's honor, that he took his spear, went into the tent, and thrust the spear through them both as they lay there. God said to Moses, "because [Phinehas] was as zealous for my honor as I am ... I am making my covenant of peace with him" (Numbers 25:10-12).

How does that story strike you? As horrible? As bloodthirsty? Our response is perhaps an alarming measure of our concern for the honor and glory of God. Moses himself – in that moment on the mountain of God, when God threatened to destroy the Israelites and give Moses a different, more obedient people to lead – pled with God to spare the people, *not for their sake, but for the sake of God's honor*. Moses said, "If you destroy them, the nations will mock you as being unable to finish what you have started. If that's going to happen," said Moses, "then destroy me with them, because I cannot bear to live in a world where your name is held in such contempt."

There it is! That's what Malachi is getting at. Where is our passion for the glory of God? He tells us that, to avoid our own destruction, we must set our

hearts to honor him. We live in a culture that mocks God, his people and his truth, and instead of recoiling in horror, too often we laugh along, follow along, and link arms with those who despise the living God.

2. We have not cherished *God's Word*.

We have been entrusted with God's truth in the midst of a culture that thinks that there is no such thing as universal truth. There is what you believe and what I believe, but there is no need to hold to the same view of truth. Over against all of that stands the Word of the living God, who says, "This is the way, walk in it." But Malachi points out that God's people have neither taught the truth nor walked in the truth. As a result, we have "caused many to stumble" (2:8). How have we done that?

3. We have not cherished *God's community*.

God dwells in the midst of his people, and in his people. This means that whatever we do involves both God himself and involves other believers whom we are linked together with in the Body of Christ. We can never act alone without affecting the entire community of God's people. In two ways, we continue to repeat the sins of Israel:

- By not being careful to marry only those who cherish God's covenant of grace (2:11b).
- By breaking faith with the wife or husband of our youth (2:14). This may either be through adultery or divorce.

Why is this matter of marriage so important? It is important because it is the ultimate metaphor of God's covenant with his people.

Conclusion

Why are people, especially young adults, fleeing the American church? Why do many leave (as did Anne Rice) in the belief that they can follow Jesus better outside than inside the church? Because, like Israel of old, the church has become just like the world around us, rather than living counter-culturally and offering the world a reason to believe the gospel of grace.

The power of God for the mission of God will again begin to flow through us when we turn from our cultural captivity to cherish God's honor, to cherish God's Word, and to cherish God's people, beginning with our own families, our husbands and wives, in whom the living Christ dwells by his Spirit.