

Malachi 1:1-14
(John 13:34-35; Ephesians 3:14-21)
“I Have Loved You”

Introduction

Why would we want, in the season of Advent, to listen to a brief little prophecy found at the very end of the Old Testament? What could it possibly have to say to us? Malachi’s name means, “my messenger,” and his message to God’s people may help us understand why we too seldom experience the reality of God’s power and presence in our lives, in our community and in our culture.

Interestingly, Christians place this book at the end of the Old Testament as preparation for the New. In the Hebrew Bible, Chronicles is the final book. So the Jewish Bible ends with the proclamation of Cyrus, king of Persia, releasing the Jewish people from captivity and charging them to return home to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple, while the early church chose to rearrange the books in order to end with Malachi and his promise that Elijah the prophet would return and prepare God’s people for the “day of the Lord.” The church understood John the Baptist as being the promised Elijah figure and Jesus as inaugurating the day of the Lord. So it is appropriate that, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we turn to the prophecy believed to point directly to that day.

God’s people were disillusioned because they thought they had done all that God required of them, and yet they were experiencing none of the power and glory of the former days of Israel’s splendor. What had gone wrong? Did God not love them as he had loved his people in the past? What of his promise that he would return again in splendor to the Temple if only they would rebuild it? Where was his glory? Where was the splendor of being the people of God? And so, we too might ask, where is the life-transforming spiritual power promised to us in Christ?

Body

- 1. The heart of God’s message to humanity is simply this: “I have loved you.”**

God’s love is displayed in its particularity, in his compassion toward his chosen people. It is important to understand the meaning of the words, “I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated” (1:2-3). The apostle Paul will later quote this verse (Romans 9:10-13) to prove that God is sovereign in choosing those who are his people, those through whom he will give his gospel to the world. But what are we to make of the idea that the God of love *hates* someone?

Jesus said that he came to reveal the Father: to show us who God is, and what he is like. In Luke's gospel, Jesus makes this arresting statement: "If anyone comes to me and does not hate his father and mother, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple. Whoever does not bear his own cross and come after me cannot be my disciple" (Luke 14:26-27).

God clearly calls us the Bible to love, even our enemies, and especially those closest to us. So to hate, in this covenantal sense, does not mean to wish ill or to desire to hurt – it does not even mean to fail to love well. It means that we must not permit any relationship, however close, however natural, however tender, however loving, to come before God's purposes. Esau was the oldest and by law was to inherit the blessing. But God's purposes of salvation had chosen Jacob's descendants, and nothing Esau could do would enable him to change God's purposes. Later we see God greatly bless and prosper Esau, but with regard to the covenant line, he was rejected, "hated" in covenantal terms, although loved in relational terms.

Here is the key: God's purpose in choosing particular people is not to bless them and then withhold his loving kindness from everyone else. It is rather that God chooses those through whom he will pour out his blessing and salvation on all the people of the world.

And so, we also see God's love displayed in its universality, in his compassion for the whole world. Malachi will repeat this theme throughout this brief work: "Great is the Lord beyond the borders of Israel!" (1:5). "My name will be great among the nations" (1:11). "My name will be feared among the nations" (1:14). Malachi depicts the mission of God's people as being for the sake of the nations. Whenever we forget that, we begin to presume upon God's love for us, and to lose the experience of his power and glory in our midst. Why does he dwell in power and glory in the midst of his people? For the sake of the glory of his name *among the nations*. Israel had forgotten that, and so have many of us. This was at the heart of Israel's failure to experience God's presence and glory, and is today in the western church at the heart of our much-lamented absence of spiritual power.

In the rest of this little book, Malachi will spell out the ways that we have turned away from God without even realizing it. He will show us where we need to repent and return to God if we would again be a light to the nations.

- 2. If the heart of God's message is that he loves us, the heart of his warning is this: We will fail to experience God's love if we fail to respond to his love.** In the remaining verses of chapter one, Malachi points out four of these areas where we should evaluate our response to God's love.

Have we honored him as Father? What does that mean? It should mean at least this: grateful obedience. Children who understand and appreciate their parents' love and provision for them should respond with gratitude displayed in obedience. If this is true of human families, how much more should it be true of God's family? When we grasp this, God's law is no longer an oppressive yoke, but a beautiful picture of what it looks like to love the Lord and to love one another. If we would honor our heavenly Father, if we would know the reality of his love, then the first place to experience it is in choosing to walk in the ways of loving obedience.

Have we honored him as Lord? Do we bring him our first and best, or our last and least? Israel was offering the Lord polluted food, food that they did not want to eat, sacrifices that cost them nothing, garbage, refuse. It showed that religion had become for them simply a formality to be endured rather than the expression of a living relationship with the Lord and his people. What of us? Do we give to the work of the Lord, to his mission in this community and beyond? And what do we give? What we no longer want or no longer need or value, or do we give our best?

Have we honored him in our worship? Do we delight in our times of worship and look forward to them, or do we find worship a chore and look forward to finishing so that we can get on with our lives? God knows our hearts. The Israelites said, "What a weariness this is" (1:13). Do we come to the Lord's house on the Lord's Day with a sense of expectation, with a desire to meet with the Lord, to offer him praise and worship, to hear his word and to go together to his table? Or is it a great weariness to be borne out of habit, in case these things be true?

Have we honored him in our service? "What a burden!" said God's people at the thought of serving him. They served just as they worshiped him: both had become burdens to be borne, rather than loving service to be offered out of gratitude. In 1 John 5, John tells us that the final mark of those who have been born of the Spirit is that they keep God's commands, *and his commands are not burdensome*. Is the Lord a true presence in our lives, or are we simply following a religion? Do we realize that the God of the Bible is not a distant deity, but the God who is present to his people and who acts in history?

- 3. These questions are not intended to beat us down, but to challenge us to respond to God's loving invitation to know him and to make him known.**

God has loved us and through us will make his name great among the nations. Just as Malachi challenged the Old Covenant community to recapture their sense of wonder and gratitude at God's calling them to be his people, so we of the New Covenant community should recapture this sense of gratitude and wonder that God has chosen us for the sake of the world. God's

purpose in choosing his people is to make us a light to all the nations. His heart is for the whole world and all its ethnic groups. When that becomes our heart, then everything changes: we begin to cherish our relationship with him, especially as it is expressed in our offerings, our worship and our service.

Conclusion

Why would we languish in the foothills of half-hearted obedience, giving him our last and our least, when he calls us to the heights, to know him and make known to the nations his glory and compassion, his justice and mercy, his grace and loving kindness? Hear the good news of Malachi, the Lord's messenger: "'I have loved you,' says the Lord" (1:2). And hear the challenge given to those who have known his love: "From the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations" (1:11).

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