

Malachi 2: 1-16
(Matthew 5:13-20; Galatians 5:16-26)
“So Guard Yourselves in Your Spirit and Do Not Be Faithless”

Introduction

In the late 1990's, Christians were delighted to hear that gothic novelist, Anne Rice, best known for her *Vampire Chronicles*, had returned to the Christian faith of her youth. She proceeded to write a number of books on the life of Jesus, and then, after about a decade, announced that she was leaving the church in order to follow Christ. She saw the church as no longer being the loving community and prophetic voice for the poor and oppressed that Jesus called us to be. Like many others, including the great Mahatma Gandhi, she was drawn to Christ but repelled by those of us who claim his name. As is often noted, the fastest growing religious group in America is not atheists, but unaffiliated believers, the so-called “nones.” What has happened? How has the American church lost – at least in public perception – its prophetic voice and embracing community?

Malachi addressed his warnings to people much like us. They believed that they had done what God required, and wondered why they were not experiencing the reality of God's promised presence and power. Where was his glory? The glory of God had filled both the tabernacle in the wilderness and the temple of Solomon. Then his glory had departed during the exile of his people to Babylon. But he had promised that when his people returned from exile and rebuilt the temple, his glory would again fill it. That visible brightness of his 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 seemed to be shaken. We have heard of such things happening today in other countries and cultures where the Spirit of God is reported to be 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?

As we saw last week, God's answer to Israel, and perhaps the Spirit's answer to us, is this: “I have loved you!” (1:2). So the question is not whether God loves us, but whether we love him. In this second chapter, Malachi continues to call us to examine

ourselves, to realize that we are shaped and formed by what we most love, 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 royal priesthood" (1 Peter 2:9), and John in his Revelation refers to us as "a kingdom of priests unto our God" (Revelation 5:10). Perhaps 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 examples are given in our text of ways that we may be despising God's covenant of grace.

Body

1. Have we treasured God's honor (2:1-5)?

In order to understand these verses, we must remember what Malachi is referring to when he speaks of a "covenant of life and peace" (2:5). What would his listeners have thought of when they heard these words? The prophet is referring back to a period in the wilderness recorded in the book of Numbers when the people of Israel began "to whore with the daughters of Moab" (Numbers 25:1)" and ended up by worshipping their gods. Moses was distressed, and called the people to repent. As the people began to break down and weep over their sin and call on the Lord for mercy, a man named Zimri unrepentantly walked through the middle of the camp with a Midianite woman named Cozbi, and took her into his tent to sleep with her. One of Aaron's grandsons, a priest named Phineas, 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.

While we may appreciate his zeal for God's honor, we are horrified at his violence. But the Bible doesn't see it that way. We read,

And the Lord said to Moses, "Phineas the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, 'Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace ...'" (Numbers 25:10f).

However we of the new covenant – who have been called to love our enemies – may respond to that story, we should realize that Malachi wanted Israel to remember that God's honor and glory is something that we are to be in blood earnest about. 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."

That's Malachi's point: Where is our passion for the glory of God? He tells us that, to be his people and know his presence and power, 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 mock and despise the living God.

2. Have we treasured God's Word (2:6-9)?

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. Metanarratives, the big stories that explain meaning and promote particular values, are distrusted in our age as being instruments of power and oppression. You may believe one thing and I another, but there is no standard for judging whose views are better. Over against all of that stands the Word of God, which says, "This is the way, walk in it." God had entrusted his Word to the sons of Levi to instruct his people. As Malachi says, "True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips ... For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and the people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts" (2:6f).

But, as Malachi points out, the priests had neither taught the truth nor walked in the truth. As a result, they had "caused many to stumble" (2:8). How have we done that? As we will see in a moment, the key example is in what follows. God had made clear through his prophets that the heart of the law, both its summary and foundation, is to be found in the call to love God and to love one another. And the life of God's people, Israel, bore evidence that they cared far more for their comfort, peace and pleasure than they did for the call to place God and others first and foremost. Is this not true in every age and place, even among those of us who claim to be God's people? Are we marked by a self-sacrificial love for others and passion for God-honoring justice? So Malachi presses this home with another illustration.

3. Have we treasured God's family (2:10-16)?

God has made us his family, a family that calls him, "Father." We are to treat one another with the special family love of brothers and sisters. Because God dwells in the midst of his family, whatever we do involves both God and one another. Yet, we continue to repeat the sins of Israel. Malachi puts it this way: "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?" (2:10).

Malachi illustrates two ways that we have not taken the family of God seriously, and these two examples are as true of the church today as they were of the people of Israel.

First, there was no concern about marrying within the faith. Israel intermarried with the surrounding nations, taking into their family people who worshiped other gods and who turned their hearts away from the God of Israel and in doing so, “profaned the sanctuary of the Lord” (2:11). Israel knew that this had been tragically played out in the lives of their kings, even the great Solomon, who began so wisely and well, but who ended his days an idolater, because his wives had turned his heart away to worship other gods.

And, secondly, within marriage there was a casual view of both adultery and divorce (2:14). When we look sadly at the surrounding culture that places so little value on faithfulness, and see it reflected in so many of our own lives and families, we should remember that there is, as Solomon observed, nothing new under the sun. It was true from the very beginning of Israel and simply became accepted over time. Malachi writes,

You cover the Lord’s altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant (2:13f).

Why is this matter of marriage so important? It is important because it is the ultimate metaphor of God’s covenant with his people. “Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union?” (2:15). In other words, God’s Spirit makes two people one, as a picture of his union with us. The one who breaks this union through divorce “covers his garment with violence” (2:16).

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 and once again treasure God’s honor, treasure God’s Word, and treasure God’s family, beginning with our own families, our husbands and wives, in whom the living Christ dwells by his Spirit.