

Malachi: How do we honor God?

We've covered a lot of ground since last September 7 when we looked at God the Creator in Genesis 1 & 2 and the importance of this theme throughout the rest of Scripture. We've looked at most of the books of the Old Testament, including 10 of 16 prophetic works - the ten longest books of the prophets.

During this time we've seen this family of Abraham, the children of Israel, or Jacob - we've seen them grow from a family to a nation, from 70 people moving to Egypt to escape a famine to 1.6 million people leaving Egypt on their way to the land God had promised them. We've seen them become a people of the land, a people whose identity often had a lot to do with being in the territory God had given to them. We've seen them become a powerful nation, notably under King David, but also under some of the later kings of Judah. And we've seen them lose their land - going into exile for 70 years; many staying in Babylon for much longer than that.

What were the spiritual challenges that Israel faced when they first were freed from Egypt? They didn't know God. They didn't have a clue how to be a nation under God because they had spent 430 years being a people under Pharaoh. God gave them laws, good and just laws, laws that provided for justice for all and for mercy to those who were poor. What was the spiritual challenge they faced when they were settled in Canaan? They were surrounded by cultures that worshiped idols and were involved in a sex cult in their worship of Baal and Asherah. Their practices drew the Israelites in, caused them to fall away from faith in God, to abandon the appropriate worship of Yawheh. Their faithlessness caused the fall of the northern kingdom and the dispersal of its people, and also led to the exile of the Jews who remained for 120 years or so in the southern kingdom. Their main spiritual problem in these centuries was that they failed to honour God.

What about when they returned from exile? You've heard me say that the exile really changed the Jewish people, that they no longer fell for the Canaanite religions, but became a people who faithfully observed Sabbaths and who offered the sacrifices at the Temple. They had been transformed by their experience. They saw that God was real and powerful and that He wasn't playing games with them. They saw that He had determined that they would be His people and they began to act like it.

But there was a problem. Their hearts still weren't really in it. They recognized that God had delivered them to the King of Babylon and that He had brought them back to their homeland, but they didn't love Him. They feared Him for sure, but, at least their leaders, didn't want to give God anything more than they had to. They were religious in observing the rules, but tried to get away with the least possible, as if they were pulling the wool over God's eyes, letting Him think they were devout when they were actually just religious.

What's the difference between passion and religion? Jesus described it with a quotation from the prophet Isaiah:

*These people honor Me with their lips
But their hearts are far from Me
They worship Me in vain;
Their teachings are but rules taught by men.*
(Matt. 15:8,9; Isaiah 29:13)

This was the new spiritual challenge of the Jews after they had returned from exile. They were now observant Jews, following the laws as they knew them, but without passion or real love for God, and without an appreciation of God's love for them. This is the new culture of post-exilic Judaism - a culture that gave rise to the Pharisees and their legalistic interpretations of their Scriptures.

The final book in the Old Testament is the prophecy of Malachi, and he addresses these issues in a series of question-and-answer exchanges between God and the leaders of the Jews. Let's dig in:

*Yahweh Almighty says to the priests: "A son honors his father, and a servant respects his master. I am your Father and Master, but where are the honor and respect I deserve? You have despised My Name."
But you ask, "How have we ever despised Your Name?"
"You have despised My Name by offering defiled sacrifices on My altar."
Then you ask, "How have we defiled the sacrifices?"
You defile them by saying the altar of Yahweh deserves no respect. When you give blind animals as sacrifices, isn't that wrong? And isn't it wrong to offer animals that are crippled and diseased? Try giving gifts like that to your governor and see how pleased he is. (1:6-8)*

And then, starting in verse 10, we hear the LORD say:

I wish that someone among you would shut the Temple doors so that these worthless sacrifices could not be offered! I am not at all pleased with you . . . and I will not accept your offerings. But My Name is honored by people of other nations from morning till night. All around the world they offer sweet incense and pure offerings in honor of My Name. For My Name is great among the nations . . . But you dishonor My Name with your actions. By bringing contemptible food, you are saying it's all right to defile the Lord's table. You say, "It's too hard to serve the LORD," and you turn up your noses at His commands . . . Think of it! Animals that are stolen and mutilated, crippled and sick -- presented as offerings! Should I accept such offerings as these? . . . For I am a great king and My Name is feared among the nations! (1:10-14)

We can hardly relate to a day when a people showed God honor by offering the best of the flock, their prize animals. So, as we read these verses, we should be asking ourselves, "How does God want to be honored now, in our day, under the new covenant? Am I showing Him the honor He deserves in the way I am living my life?" The important thing to observe in this passage is that God's law required that His people offer what was the best they had. There was no 'special permission' given to those who had excuses for giving less. There is no 'opting out' clause for people who

wanted to give God something they could easily do without, like a diseased animal, instead of a sacrifice that cost them something. Watch how this theme is developed in the rest of Malachi.

Next, in chapter 2, Malachi addresses the priests directly, confronting them for teaching people things that were not true, not faithful to God's laws. They had caused people to stumble and to sin because of their deception.

Towards the end of the chapter, Malachi confronts the people's unfaithfulness in a different area:

Here is another thing you do. You cover Yahweh's altar with tears, weeping and groaning because He pays no attention to your offerings and He doesn't accept them with pleasure. You cry out, "Why has the LORD abandoned us?" I'll tell you why. Because the LORD witnessed the vows you and your wife made to each other on your wedding day when you were young. But you have been disloyal to her, though she remained your faithful companion, the wife of your marriage vows. Didn't Yahweh make you one with your wife? ... So guard yourself; remain loyal to the wife of your youth. "For I hate divorce!" says Yahweh, the God of Israel. "It is as cruel as putting on a victim's bloodstained coat ... So guard yourself; always remain loyal to your wife." (2:13-16)

When I perform a wedding ceremony, I will say words like this, "And now, because of these vows you have made in the presence of God and of these witnesses, I now pronounce you husband and wife." The part about making your vows in the presence of God is not some religious nicety, some empty declaration. Here in Malachi, God says specifically that He is a witness to the vows we make on our wedding day and, even though we were young, even though we found out things about ourselves and about our partner later on that brought challenges into our marriage, God says, "I'm holding you to the promises you made, because I hate the alternative. I hate divorce." A part of why we stay married to the person we made our vows to, is because it honors God. And a big part of why we who officiate at Christian weddings ask people to make these kinds of promises to each other is because that is God's design; His purpose for us is that we would commit to become lovers -- not judges, not bosses, not those who take revenge, not self-seekers -- lovers. When we do we are imitating someone, and we are honoring the One we are imitating.

At the end of chapter 2 we come across another way in which the Jews were dishonoring their God:

You have wearied the LORD with your words. Wearied Him? How have we wearied Him? You have wearied Him by suggesting that Yahweh favors evildoers since He does not punish them. You have wearied Him by asking, "Where is the God of justice?" (2:17)

And then God promises to bring the justice they seek. He says that He will send His messenger of the covenant, but that they will not be pleased to see Him (3:2):

But who will be able to endure it when He comes?

*Who will be able to stand and face Him when He appears?
For He will be like a blazing fire that refines metal or like strong soap that whitens clothes.*

It's easy to say that we want to see justice, but we're usually thinking about having justice served on other people, on the ones who have hurt us, or who we're afraid of, or who have done things that we find abhorrent. But what if the righteous judge comes and points out our faults and failures, our lack of love and forgiveness, our unwillingness to sacrifice ... or even to honor God in the way He deserves? Then we might not be so happy to see the judge of all the earth coming like a blazing fire to refine us like gold or silver.

The next section of chapter 3 contains a familiar back-and-forth. God says to the people,

"Return to Me and I will return to you," and they say, "How can we return when we have never gone away?"

Should people cheat God? Yet you have cheated Me!

But you ask, "What do you mean? When did we ever cheat You?"

"You have cheated Me of the tithes and offerings due to Me. You are under a curse, for your whole nation has been cheating Me. Bring all the tithes into the storehouse so there will be enough food in My Temple. If you do," says Yahweh Almighty, "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in. Try it! Let me prove it to you!" (3:7-10)

Holding back from God never produces good fruit in our lives -- even when we think we can't afford it. There are not many areas in Scripture where God says, "Test Me; try Me out in this," but that's what He says about giving. He tells us that holding back from God puts people under a curse, but giving generously brings incredible blessing: "I will open the windows of heaven for you. I will pour out a blessing so great you won't have enough room to take it in. Try it! Let me prove it to you!" Test God in this area. He welcomes that.

One more question and answer (3:13-15):

"You have said terrible things about Me," says the LORD.

"What do you mean? How have we spoken against You?"

You have said, "What's the use of serving God? What have we gained by obeying His commands or by trying to show Yahweh Almighty that we are sorry for our sins? From now on we will say, "Blessed are the arrogant." For those who do evil get rich, and those who dare God to punish them go free of harm."

This is similar to the passage we read earlier where the people complained that God did not enact justice on the earth, that He favored evildoers by letting them go without punishment. And God doesn't even bother to answer this complaint -- He just brings it to their attention, just tells them how they have shown Him disrespect, and the story moves on.

Malachi ends by presenting the options that the people have, the choice they must make. In camp 1, we read about those who feared the LORD:

Then those who feared the LORD spoke with each other, and Yahweh listened to what they said. In His presence, a scroll of remembrance was written to record the names of those who feared Him and loved to think about Him. "They will be My people," says the LORD Almighty. "On the day when I act, they will be My own special treasure. I will spare them as a father spares an obedient and dutiful child. Then you will again see the difference between the righteous and the wicked, between those who serve God and those who do not." Yahweh Almighty says, "The day of judgment is coming, burning like a furnace. The arrogant and the wicked will be burned up like straw on that day. They will be consumed like a tree -- roots and all. But for you who fear My Name, the Sun of Righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go free, leaping with joy like calves let out to pasture. (3:16-4:2)

And the last chapter closes -- and the Old Testament closes with it -- with the promise that, before the day of Yahweh, He will send the prophet Elijah to preach to His people, to turn the hearts of parents to their children and the hearts of children to their parents. And, about 400 years later, the angel Gabriel spoke to an elderly priest named Zechariah while he was burning incense in the Temple of Yahweh in Jerusalem and told him that he and his wife Elizabeth would be parents to a boy, who they were to name John. This one would be the Elijah that was foretold in Malachi - it was Jesus who called him that.

Malachi's prophecies return again and again to this theme of what it means to honor God. He sees people who think it's okay to offer God their leftovers, the weak and injured members of the flock. He sees people who think it's okay to abandon the person to whom you vowed faithfulness and love. He sees people who complain about God's justice or lack of it and people who feel that it's not worth serving God -- there's not enough material gain; not enough riches to compete with the arrogant. He sees people who withhold their tithe from God, really, who don't trust God enough to give Him even a tenth of all He has given to them. And the prophet says, "What you do in these areas - in your offerings, in your attitudes and in your marriages - reveals your lack of reverence for God. It tells the world that there is no fear of God in your hearts, no deep and profound respect for who He is and for all He has done. Instead, there is this sense that God exists only to please you, to provide for you, to bless you -- so if you don't get what you want, God becomes disposable. If your life is not working out, then God is to blame, as if His universe existed entirely for your benefit." And then he says, very directly, that those who hold this view of God will be judged for it, but those -

- catch these two basic things -- who fear the Lord and who love to think about Him . . .

1. they will be the people of God
2. they will be God's own special treasure
3. they will be spared the judgment that is coming
4. they will be healed
5. they will enter into joyful freedom

That's an impressive list and it challenges us to make these kinds of choices in our own lives. Do we take God for granted, treat Him like an insurance policy, maintain a casual attitude towards our sins, blame Him when things go wrong, give Him less than our best, substantially less than our best? Where would we find a Scripture that says that's all okay? We won't.

So the challenge of Malachi is a challenge to live in a way that truly honors God. The Jews of the day, especially the religious leaders, were good at doing the religious thing, good at "looking good" in front of others. But their hearts were not touched; they didn't really love God -- they only served Him in a half-hearted way. The prophet told them that that wasn't good enough, that God deserved better, and his word still holds true for us today. God is worthy of devotion, of obedience, but especially of deep and profound love. If we can live with an appreciation for His power and wisdom in Creation, with a strong value on His patience in teaching Israel how to love truth and honor what is good and right, with a humble appreciation for the cross of Christ where He paid the price for our rebellion against God, then we will have learned the central lessons of the book of Malachi ... and of the Old Testament as a whole. It is always right and always appropriate to honor God, for who He is and for what He has done, and continues to do.