

PRACTICAL LESSONS

from

MALACHI

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MALACHI: A CALL TO REVERENCE

A Lecture Delivered at Florida College on February 2, 1989

Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament. After this oracle was delivered, God did not speak prophetically to His people again until John the Baptist appeared preaching in the wilderness of Judea over four hundred years later. The message of Malachi, whose name means “My Messenger,” was God’s last word to Israel prior to the approach of the kingdom of the Messiah. A little book of terrifying warnings and glorious hope, it is just as relevant and powerful today than it was in about 435 B.C. when it was first presented. The spiritual conditions confronted by Malachi in post-exilic Jerusalem are distressingly similar to some of our own.

The famous decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. had allowed the captive Jews in Babylonia to return to Judea to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple. Those who chose to return from exile did so in several groups: the first under Zerubbabel, and later others under Ezra and Nehemiah. Against serious difficulty and discouragement, these returnees repopulated Jerusalem and reinstated the ancient temple worship. Spurring the people on to completion of their great work was the task of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

Those who came back first to Jerusalem faced considerable hardship, but they had the advantage of the excitement of an important undertaking in its early stages. As the years came and went, however, disillusionment and disinterest set in. By the time Ezra and Nehemiah arrived, they found social and spiritual conditions dangerously low. The walls of Jerusalem still lay demolished — but worse, the religious life of the people had badly deteriorated and called for urgent repair. “The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi” (Mal. 1:1) addressed these spiritual needs of Israel in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, about one hundred years after the first Jews had returned from Babylonian exile. Reading the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi together, we come up with something like the following list of characteristics of the times:

1. **Spiritual apathy** (Mal. 1:2,13; 4:6).
2. **Corruption of the priesthood** (Neh. 13:4-9,28-31; Mal. 1:6; 2:1-9; 3:3,4).
3. **Degeneracy in worship** (Mal. 1:7-14).
4. **Withholding of tithes and offerings** (Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10-14; Mal. 3:8-12).
5. **Breaking of the Sabbath** (Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22).
6. **Cynicism and lack of moral discrimination** (Mal. 2:17; 3:13-15,18).
7. **Disregard of God’s marriage law** (Ezra 9:1,2; Neh. 10:30; 13:23-28; Mal. 2:10-16).
8. **Social injustice** (Neh. 5:1-13; Mal. 3:5).

Against these sins, Malachi sounds the trumpet call of God's righteous judgment. The Lord is coming to refine and purge His people (Mal. 3:1-3), and the day of His coming will consume with a burning that will leave the ungodly "neither root nor branch" (Mal. 4:1). But to the righteous remnant, that will be a day of blessing: "To you who *fear My name*, the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings" (Mal. 4:2).

The expression "fear My name" is centrally important. Underlying each specific condemnation of Israel's sins is Malachi's basic charge: the people had simply failed to fear God. The real sickness, of which all other problems were merely symptoms, was that the Lord of hosts was no longer being honored and revered. As John Benton suggests, "Reverence is not the homage which weak minds pay to religious tradition and the status quo; it is rather the loving, sincere and practical recognition of the greatness of God" (*Losing Touch with the Living God: The Message of Malachi*, pp. 27,28). The trouble in Malachi's age was not unlike that of the Gentiles described by Paul in the New Testament: "Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful" (Rom. 1:21). Thus, the little book of Malachi, with which the Old Testament closes, is a call to the genuine *reverence* which must ever characterize God's true people. The prophet's summons to reverence may clearly be seen in the context of three of the most salient sins of Malachi's people.

Corruption of the Priesthood

When God conferred the priesthood upon the Levitical family of Aaron, He assigned vital responsibilities to them. Their various duties may be put under three general headings: officiating in the various rituals of the tabernacle and temple service (Lev. 21:6), instructing the nation in the Law of Moses (Lev. 10:11), and adjudicating disputes over application of the law to specific cases (Deut. 17:8-11). In these functions — presiding over the temple sacrifices and ceremonies, teaching what God's law required, and judging controverted cases between individuals — the priests were to play a critical role in seeing that Israel knew the Scriptures and worshiped properly. Their ministry would be a dominant influence upon the spiritual life of the nation. In short, the holiness God desired of His chosen people would depend heavily upon the exemplary character and function of the priests.

However, when Malachi delivered his prophecy at the end of Old Testament history, the Levitical priesthood was what it had often been since Sinai: corrupt, hypocritical, and a menace to the nation it was to have served. Malachi's message contained a forceful rebuke to these negligent and unscrupulous priests, and a plea for them to lead Israel in a renewal of its reverence for the Lord. The sins of which the Lord's priests were guilty are nothing less than shocking:

1. **Refusing to reverence the Lord and despising His name** (Mal. 1:6).
2. **Offering the blind, lame, sick, etc. as sacrifices** (Mal. 1:7,8).
3. **Treating the altar as contemptible** (Mal. 1:7,12).
4. **Treating the Lord's service as a wearisome drudgery** (Mal. 1:13).
5. **Refusing to take the Lord's warning to heart** (Mal. 2:1,2).
6. **Corrupting the priestly covenant of Levi** (Mal. 2:4,5,8).
7. **Departing from the way of the Lord** (Mal. 2:8,9).

8. **Causing the people to stumble at the law** (Mal. 2:8).
9. **Showing partiality in the priestly functions** (Mal. 2:9).

If the priests would not repent of these sins, Malachi warned of consequences commensurate with the seriousness of their spiritual crimes. Through the prophet, God said, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings” (Mal. 2:2). This may mean that the priestly blessing of the people (Num. 6:22-27) would be turned into a curse, or that the priestly portion of the people’s sacrifices, on which the priests depended for their sustenance, would be cursed. Further, God promised, “I will rebuke your descendants” (Mal. 2:3). An alternate reading is “I will rebuke your *arm*,” i.e. the ability to perform the priestly sacrifices and blessings. In addition, God said, “[I will] spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your solemn feasts; and one will take you away with it” (Mal. 2:3). The repugnance of the image of dung being smeared on the faces of the priests indicates the abominableness of their actions as God saw them. Finally, God spoke of a punishment that had already begun: “I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people” (Mal. 2:9). The honor in which righteous priests were to be held had been forfeited; these men deserved contempt and disrepute. Walter Kaiser points out the irony of this disrepute. Since they had disrespected God for the purpose of courting human popularity, God saw to it that their reward was not greater public acclaim, but public mockery (*Malachi: God’s Unchanging Love*, p. 64).

These final Old Testament warnings to the wayward priests of the “covenant of Levi” (Mal. 2:8) are set within the context of Malachi’s messianic prophecy of a coming day when the “Messenger of the covenant” (Mal. 3:1) would “purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3). Surely this is a reference to the spiritual priesthood of us today who are privileged “to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt. 2:5). We are the very occupants of this purged and purified priesthood, having entered into it by the obedience of faith. The honor and blessings of our priesthood before the world far surpass those of the sons of Aaron before Israel. But the greater honor entails greater responsibilities, and Malachi’s message ought to probe our consciences. Are we doing any better with our priesthood than the Levites were with theirs?

Malachi describes the function of our priesthood no less than that of the Levites when he says, “The lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 2:7). Ideally, the priest is “reverent” (Mal. 2:5), the “law of truth” is in his mouth (Mal. 2:6), and “injustice” is never found on his lips (Mal. 2:6). He walks with God “in peace and equity” (Mal. 2:6), and he turns “many away from iniquity” (Mal. 2:6). An important part of the priest’s work, as G. Campbell Morgan puts it, is to tell the people the will of God, and “that not simply as one who possesses it as a wonderful theory, but as one who is himself living within the realm thereof” (*Malachi’s Message for Today*, p. 33). But woe to those priests, then and now, who have had exactly the opposite influence and “have caused many to stumble at the law” (Mal. 2:8). It is sobering to contemplate what must be God’s full wrath against those whose ministry it is to represent Him to others, but who, in fact, have been the occasion of others turning their backs on Him. There is no greater irreverence than that of people whose very business it is to glorify the Lord, and the warning of Malachi gives no hope to priests who, when admonished, “will not hear, and...will not take it to heart” (Mal. 2:2).

Disregard of God's Marriage Law

Another evidence of Israel's irreverence toward God was their violation of the divine will regarding marriage. There were actually two problems here. The first mentioned was intermarriage with "the daughter[s] of a foreign god" (Mal. 2:11). Many — some argue the priests in particular — were marrying Gentile women who were practitioners of idolatry, despite the clear prohibition of this in the Law of Moses (Exo. 34:12-17; Deut. 7:1-5). Both Ezra (Ezra 9:1,2) and Nehemiah (Neh. 10:30; 13:23-28) describe their distress at this situation. In calling for repentance, Nehemiah says, "I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair" (Neh. 13:25). Malachi is equally alarmed when he says, "Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem" (Mal. 2:11). He said the intermarriages had "profaned the Lord's holy institution which He loves" (Mal. 2:11). This seems to mean that they had compromised the holiness of God's beloved chosen nation. God was not concerned about the maintenance of a pure physical bloodline, but rather, a pure religious character. True to God's original prediction, this inner holiness had always been contaminated when Israel took idolaters for their spouses (e.g. 1 Kgs. 11:1-8), and so it was in Malachi's day.

But another, and perhaps more fundamental, problem lay behind the pagan intermarriages. As if these were not bad enough, the men of Israel had been divorcing their original wives in order to marry the idolaters! Malachi charged, "The Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously" (Mal. 2:14). He then asked, "Did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring" (Mal. 2:15). There are only a handful of texts in the Old Testament that are as hard as this one to translate and interpret. But perhaps Kaiser is on the right track in his paraphrase:

Why did God make Adam and Eve only one flesh, when he might have given Adam many wives, for God certainly had more than enough of the Spirit, or his creative power, in reserve to furnish many partners? However, our God was seeking a godly offspring, and such plurality would not have been conducive to this result (*Malachi: God's Unchanging Love*, pp. 71,72).

It is all too obvious that Malachi's teaching on divorce is desperately needed today. Consider the sins involved in an unscriptural divorce, even when no adulterous remarriage takes place. First, a covenant is broken to which God Himself is a party. Malachi says of the unlawfully divorced wife, "She is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14). Centuries earlier, Solomon had said that the seductress "forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of God" (Prov. 2:17). In view of the covenant involved, spouses ought to be able to rest their complete trust in the other's dependability. When one betrays that confidence by divorce, Malachi says that he commits betrayal and treachery (Mal. 2:14-16). Further, to divorce is to perpetrate an act of injustice and violence against one's mate (Mal. 2:16). It is an injurious harm inflicted on one who has a right to expect safety and support. To divorce one's mate is nothing less than to back out of a God-honored covenant, to show oneself to be false hearted, and to commit cruelty in pursuit of one's own will. It is the ultimately selfish act.

But the wrong done to a marriage partner is not the end of the matter. Malachi says, “You cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with good will from your hands” (Mal. 2:13). The men of Israel could not understand why God was not pleased with their sacrifices, but they were fools to think He would accept the “worship” of men busy doing treachery and violence to their wives. The wives were weeping for the injustice done to them, and “the tears of these mistreated wives stood as an impenetrable barrier between the worshipers and Jehovah” (Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets*, p. 416). God simply will not submit Himself to the indignity of being worshiped by those who care nothing about the wrongs they have done to others (Mt. 5:23,24; 1 Pt. 3:7; etc.). Unless repentance is forthcoming, broken relationships with other human beings break our relationship with God, and those who contemplate unlawfully divorcing a spouse would do well to consider that it will be impossible to do so and continue to worship God right along. Injustice toward the creature stems from irreverence toward the Creator — and God does not accept the worship of those who do not reverence Him.

To put it pointedly, God has said *not to divorce* one’s mate. In Jesus’ words, “What God has joined together, let not man separate” (Mt. 19:6). Only one scriptural exception to this is given (Mt. 19:9). Who is bold enough to add other reasons and affirm that man may with impunity do what God said not to do? Malachi’s words are as clear as they are strong: “The Lord God of Israel says that He *hates divorce*, for it covers one’s garment with violence” (Mal. 2:16). It is not without good reason that he added to his hearers, and to us, “Take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously” (Mal. 2:16).

Degeneracy in Worship

From the beginning of time, God has required worship of man. He has done so not because He needs anything man is capable of giving to Him (Ac. 17:25), but because worship is inherent in the Creator-creature relationship. Man cannot survive spiritually without worship any more than he can survive physically without air to breathe. But man has not always held an accurate concept of the nature and purpose of worship, nor has he always done what God required in the actual practice of worship. Malachi was called to prophesy to a people who had greatly perverted the divine worship, and his book deals with the irreverence that was being shown at the Lord’s altar.

It is disheartening to think that, within a hundred years of the return of the first Jewish exiles from their Babylonian ordeal, their worship of God had already stagnated and become vain, but that was the case. And what God had to say about it is typical of everything else the Scriptures say about vain worship: the rebuke was blistering. The thing they were calling worship was worse than no worship at all. The Lord asked, “‘Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘nor will I accept an offering from your hands’” (Mal. 1:10,11). God evidently did not judge the crisis to be a minor one. The worship of Israel had become empty and futile. Whatever else their sacrifices and ceremonies might have been good for, they were no good for pleasing the Lord. He did not accept them.

Malachi addressed himself to a people who had, over time, settled down to a rather mechanical concept of worship. They imagined that performance of the bare act itself was sufficient to produce the desired results, regardless of the character, attitude, or intent of the worshiper. What is more, they calculated that even the outward act could be trimmed and reduced to a convenient minimum (Mal. 1:6-14; Mal. 3:8-12). Malachi's people seem to have had little sincerity or genuine reverence about their worship. Even when what they were doing was what had been commanded, their heart was not involved (Mal. 1:6). Isaiah's words, written many years earlier and quoted by the Lord in Mt. 15:8,9, are apropos: "These people draw near to Me with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men" (Isa. 29:13). Malachi was simply the last in a long line of prophets God had sent to admonish Israel for the meaningless, useless way it worshiped.

There was widespread social corruption and injustice among Malachi's people. The Lord said, "I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and the fatherless, and against those who turn away an alien — because they do not fear Me" (Mal. 3:5). The populace seems not to have considered how offensive to God these social sins rendered their worship. They were indifferent to the vital connection between acceptable worship and godly character. Failing to understand that God was looking for obedience, purity of life, and holiness in the inner man, they evidently assumed God would be pleased with their rituals irrespective of what they were doing outside the temple precincts. But Samuel had asked Saul the pertinent question centuries before: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22; cf. Deut. 10:12; Mic. 6:6-8).

In the New Testament, the Lord said that a certain scribe was not far from the kingdom when he said, "To love [God] with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one's neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices" (Mk. 12:33). Jesus rebuked those of His day for their confusion about what God desires from man. On more than one occasion, in exhorting the ritualistic and self-righteous Pharisees, He quoted Hos. 6:6, where God had said, "I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings." Cf. Mt. 9:13; 12:7.

Today, we sorely need to hear these words. If we think that we can turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the disadvantaged (Jas. 1:27), indulge in secret immorality (1 Tim. 2:8), live lives of bitterness, hostility, and enmity (Mt. 5:23,24), and then come and bow our heads piously before the table of the Lord on His day, we are badly mistaken. One of the Proverbs says simply, "One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination" (Prov. 28:9). And God said through Isaiah, "I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting" (Isa. 1:13; cf. vv. 10-15). To live unrighteously and then to go through the motions of righteous worship is to make a mockery of all that worship is intended to be. It is to treat God Himself with an offhanded contempt worse even than blasphemy. God has always been more patient with hatred in His foes than hypocrisy in His friends.

In Malachi's day, however, the worship of Israel had one other fault: it was a worship of mere convenience rather than of true sacrifice. God said, "Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed

Me! But you say, 'In what way have we robbed You?' In tithes and offerings" (Mal. 3:8). Furthermore, according the Law of Moses, each animal to be sacrificed as a burnt offering to the Lord was to be without blemish of any kind; it was to be the very best the offerer had (Deut. 17:1; Lev. 22:17-25; etc.). But those to whom Malachi preached were offering animals that were blind, lame, sick, and possibly even stolen (Mal. 1:8,13,14). In this they were doing less by God than by their civil rulers. Malachi pointedly challenged them, "Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?" (Mal. 1:8). They were actually trying to swindle the Lord. "But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and makes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished" (Mal. 1:14). Indeed, "only a desire to be something in public that one was not in one's own heart could have led to this type of showmanship" (Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Malachi: God's Unchanging Love*, p. 50).

King David, of course, had exemplified the correct attitude about offerings to the Lord. When Araunah offered to donate to David the materials for a sacrifice, David replied, "No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24). It represents no great love for the Lord to "sacrifice" to Him whatever one can easily get along without. Hence, Jesus said of the poor widow who dropped two mites into the temple treasury, "[She] has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood" (Mk. 12:43,44). Though today the Lord does not require tithes and animal sacrifices, we still need Malachi's admonition. We are the Gentiles among whom the Lord said, "My name shall be great" (Mal. 1:11). Our offering to Him must be "a pure offering" (Mal. 1:11). Whether it is time, money, or ourselves we are contributing to the Lord's cause, it will have to be more than the refuse we skim off our surplus. The Hebrew writer urged, "Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire" (Hb. 12:28,29). He will not be mocked with our leftovers.

In sum, the worship which Malachi condemned was one which trifled with the greatness of God. It was of the sort described by Solomon as "the sacrifice of fools" (Eccl. 5:1). It insulted God by using Him as a means to selfish ends; it was something in which the worshipers sought maximum carnal gains from minimum spiritual investments. And they had grown tired of playing even this game. They were slouching through their rituals with the sneer, "Oh, what a weariness!" (Mal. 1:13). Their perfunctory and slovenly worship had become little more than a drudgery. Malachi warned in no uncertain terms that Israel was wasting what time they did spend in this chore. Until the day when their worship could be an expression of loving reverence for the Lord of hosts, the doors of the temple should remain shut (Mal. 1:10).

Conclusion: The Messenger of the Covenant

As was typical of the prophets, Malachi laid great stress on the covenant of God with His people and on the unfaithfulness of Israel to that covenant. Had it not been for God's faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18; 17:2; etc.) and the covenant He made with Israel at Sinai (Exo. 19:5,6; 34:27; etc.), the nation would long since have passed away with other peoples under the righteous judgment of God: "For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob" (Mal. 3:6). Despite the Lord's steadfast love,

however, Israel had not kept the covenant. God said, “From the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them” (Mal. 3:7). Malachi deplored the sins of the people as covenant violations. In regard to the pagan intermarriages, for example, he said, “Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers?” (Mal. 2:10). Similarly, the priestly corruptions were transgressions of the “covenant of Levi” (Mal. 2:8; cf. 2:4,5).

Conditions in and around Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile did not appear to be consistent with God’s promise of blessing to His reinstated people, and the people themselves could think of nothing to attribute this to except God’s indifference. Yet certain blessings of the covenant were clearly dependent on obedience to the Law of Moses (Deut. 28), and Malachi saw with a clear eye exactly what the problem was: the God of the covenant was being dishonored in the hearts of Israel. The Lord of hosts was being cheated (Mal. 1:14), robbed (Mal. 3:8), sneered at (Mal. 1:13), insulted and treated with contempt (Mal. 1:7,12). Harsh words were being spoken against Him (Mal. 2:13), His name was being profaned (Mal. 1:12), His justice was being called into question (Mal. 2:17), and His patience was being worn thin by their words (Mal. 2:17). The people denied that God loved them (Mal. 1:2), and they had openly begun to doubt there was any advantage in serving God, complaining that God blessed the wicked more than the righteous (Mal. 3:14,15). From our vantage point, it is nearly incredible that these backsliders were still expecting God’s blessing! There was irreverence piled upon irreverence. Yet, despite all this, Israel was blindly ignorant that she had a problem. Charged with despising God’s name, the people’s dumbfounded response was: “In what way have we despised Your name?”

It is crucial to note that these covenant-breakers in Israel were not in open rebellion against God. To read the horrible ways in which God said they had shown disrespect to Him, we might easily think of them as blatant sinners who had departed from the Lord altogether. But that is not so. From God’s perspective, they were worse than blatant sinners. These were men and women, perhaps not totally unlike ourselves, who, to borrow Paul’s words, had “a form of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5) but denied the power of it. If they were shaving the corners a bit, still they were continuing to go through most of the outward motions of the public worship of God. Their sins were religiously “respectable,” and their problem was on the inside, where only God sees. Is it not possible that God at times sees in us the same shallowness of faith, the same selfishness, the same compromise, the same weariness with worship — in short, the same basic lack of reverence that plagued Israel? If so, we need to hear Malachi’s warning.

There were those in Malachi’s day, as there have always been, who had such a grossly inadequate understanding of their own sins that they looked forward to the day when God would pour out His vengeance on “the wicked.” And Malachi left no doubt that a day of reckoning was ahead: “Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up” (Mal. 4:1). But if Israel welcomed this punitive aspect of the Messiah’s coming, they might be surprised to find themselves among those burned up.

And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming...But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and a

purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness (Mal. 3:1-3).

For those who had trifled with the awesome holiness of God, the coming of the Messiah would not be a joyful event.

But, God be thanked, there was also in Malachi's day a righteous remnant. For these, the Messiah *would* bring joy.

Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. 'They shall be mine,' says the Lord of hosts, 'on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him' (Mal. 3:16,17).

The Lord continues, "To you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this" (Mal. 4:2,3). To those who knew what true reverence meant, the coming of the Messiah would be as the morning rise of the life-giving sun with healing in its rays.

Malachi showed, however, that another figure must come before the Messiah. Through the prophet, God said, "Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me" (Mal. 3:1). And at the very end of the prophecy, God foretold, "Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:5,6). No Old Testament prophecy is interpreted any more clearly in the New Testament than this one, which is a prophecy of John the Baptist, whose work it was to proclaim the repentance from sin without which Christ and His kingdom could not be received (Mt. 11:10-14; 17:10-13; Mk. 1:1-4; Lk. 1:17,76; Jn. 1:23; 3:28).

Thus we come to "the end of the end" of the Old Testament. God had brought Israel into nationhood and entered into His covenant with her. He had sustained her, blessed her, preached to her, punished her, and restored her. After all this, Israel persisted in irreverent sin. Through Malachi, God issued one last call for repentance, announced the coming of one who would prepare the way for the Messiah, and proclaimed the advent of the Messiah Himself. There was nothing more that God could do or say to Israel until "the fullness of the time had come" (Gal. 4:4,5) four hundred years later.

Malachi's prophecy ends with this threat of the Lord, "Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse" (Mal. 4:6). The Gospel of John says, "The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ" (Jn. 1:14). Placing the law of the Old Covenant over against the grace of the New Covenant, many commentators point out that Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, ends with the word *curse*, while Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, ends on a note of *blessing*. It is surely not coincidental that this is true. Even so, we had better be careful not to underestimate the relevance of Malachi's curse to ourselves. In this age of grace, it is just as necessary for us to reverence God as it was for the Jews of ancient

Jerusalem to do so. If we do not hold God in our hearts with genuine godly fear, Malachi's curse will fall on us as surely it did on those of his own day. God requires that we honor and respect Him, not only in word but also in deed. He seeks from us a worship that is truly worship, one that heeds His instructions, and one that springs from hearts of love and faith. He requires that we fear His name. As in Malachi's day, so in ours, God's words roll thunderously down from heaven, "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" (Mal. 1:6).

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Practical Lessons from Malachi

THE IMPORTANCE OF REVERENCE FOR GOD

Introduction

- A. Malachi is the last book in the Old Testament.
 - 1. After Malachi, God did not speak prophetically to His people again until John the Baptist came preaching in the wilderness of Judea over 400 years later.
 - 2. The message of Malachi (whose name means “My Messenger”) was God’s last word to Israel prior to the approach of the kingdom of the Messiah.
 - 3. It is a little book of terrifying warnings and glorious hope — and it is just as relevant and powerful today as it was in about 435 B.C. when it was first presented.
 - 4. The spiritual conditions confronted by Malachi in post-exilic Jerusalem are distressingly similar to some of our own.

- B. The Restoration period, with which Malachi deals, began with the return of the Jews from captivity in Babylon.
 - 1. The famous decree of Cyrus in 538 B.C. had allowed the captive Jews in Babylonia to return to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple.
 - 2. Those who chose to return did so in several groups: the first under Zerubbabel, and later others under Ezra and Nehemiah.
 - 3. Against serious difficulty and discouragement, these returnees repopulated Jerusalem and reinstated the temple worship.
 - 4. Spurring the people on to completion of their great work was the task of the prophets Haggai and Zechariah.

- C. The time of Malachi’s work was toward the end of the Restoration period.
 - 1. Those who came back first to Jerusalem faced hardship, but they had the advantage of the excitement of an important undertaking in its early stages.
 - 2. As the years came and went, however, disillusionment and disinterest set in.
 - 3. By the time Ezra and Nehemiah arrived, they found social and spiritual conditions dangerously low.
 - 4. The walls of Jerusalem still lay demolished — but worse, the religious life of the people had badly deteriorated and called for urgent repair.
 - 5. “The burden of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi” (Mal. 1:1) addressed the spiritual needs of Israel in the time of Ezra and Nehemiah, about 100 years after the first Jews had returned from Babylonian exile.

D. Reading the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Malachi together, we come up with a disheartening list of problems that characterized the times.

1. *Spiritual apathy* - Mal. 1:2,13; 4:6.
2. *Corruption of the priesthood* - Neh. 13:4-9,28-31; Mal. 1:6; 2:1-9; 3:3,4.
3. *Degeneracy in worship* - Mal. 1:7-14.
4. *Withholding of tithes and offerings* - Neh. 10:32-39; 13:10-14; Mal. 3:8-12.
5. *Breaking of the Sabbath* - Neh. 10:31; 13:15-22.
6. *Cynicism and lack of moral discrimination* - Mal. 2:17; 3:13-15,18.
7. *Disregard of God's marriage law* - Ezra 9:1,2; Neh. 10:30; 13:23-28; Mal. 2:10-16.
8. *Social injustice* - Neh. 5:1-13; Mal. 3:5.

E. Against these sins, Malachi sounds the trumpet call of God's righteous judgment.

1. The Lord is coming to purge and purify His people - Mal. 3:1-3.
2. The day of the Lord's coming will consume with a burning that will leave the ungodly "neither root nor branch" (Mal. 4:1).
3. But that will be a day of blessing for the righteous remnant: "To you who *fear My name*, the Sun of righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings" (Mal. 4:2).

F. The expression "fear My name" is of central importance.

1. Back of each specific rebuke of Israel's sins is Malachi's basic charge: *the people had simply failed to fear God*.
2. The real sickness, of which all other problems were merely symptoms, was that the Lord of hosts was no longer being honored and revered.
3. "Reverence is not the homage which weak minds pay to religious tradition and the status quo; it is rather the loving, sincere and practical recognition of the greatness of God." John Benton, *Losing Touch with the Living God: The Message of Malachi* (1985), pp. 27,28.
4. The trouble in Malachi's age was not unlike that of the Gentiles described in the New Testament by Paul: "Although they knew God, they did not glorify Him as God, nor were thankful" (Rom. 1:21).
5. Thus the little book of Malachi, with which the Old Testament closes, is a call to the genuine *reverence* which must ever characterize God's true people.

I. WHAT REVERENCE MEANS

A. In Malachi, several different expressions describe the people's failure to reverence God.

1. God asked "Where is My *honor*?...Where is My *reverence*?" (Mal. 1:6).
2. He charged Israel with having "*despised My name*" (Mal. 1:6).
3. He said, "My name shall be great among the nations...But you *profane* it" (Mal. 1:11,12).
4. He rebuked the priests for having refused to "*give glory* to My name" (Mal. 2:2).
5. He promised that those who "do not *fear Me*" (Mal. 3:5) would be punished.

6. On the other hand, the righteous remnant who would be blessed by the Lord are “those who *feared the Lord*” (Mal. 3:16) — God said they were those “who *fear My name*” (Mal. 4:2).
- B. To reverence God is to “hallow” Him, to treat Him as holy.
 - C. The use of the expression “fear of the Lord” in Proverbs teaches much about reverence. Cf. Prov. 1:7,29; 2:5; 8:13; 9:10; 10:27; 14:26,27; 15:16,33; 16:6; 19:23; 22:4; 23:17.
 - D. The elements that make up reverence may be considered in various ways.
 1. Reverence may be thought of as “radical respect.”
 2. Reverence = respect + love.
 3. Irreverence is actually a refusal to acknowledge God’s love! Cf. Mal. 1:2.
 4. As indicated by the title of John Benton’s commentary on Malachi, irreverence is “losing touch with the living God.”

II. ONE IMPORTANT REASON WE MUST SHOW REVERENCE FOR GOD

- A. Malachi charged his brethren with having failed to uphold the honor of God “among the nations” (Mal. 1:11,12).
 1. Nehemiah asked, “Should you not walk in the fear of our God because of the reproach of the nations, our enemies?” (Neh. 5:9).
 2. It ought to catch our attention that the most drastic and dramatic punishments of God in the Bible are in those instances when reverence was not shown to God by the example of those who business it was to be doing that very thing - e.g. Num. 20:12.
 - a. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the incident in which Nadab and Abihu lost their lives - Lev. 10:1-3.
 - b. It is interesting that, God having defended His honor by striking Nadab and Abihu dead, He did not allow even allow Aaron to show grief for his own sons, lest he appear to be more concerned about the loss of his sons than the loss of the Lord’s honor - Lev. 10:6,7.
- B. As the Lord’s people today, our actions do not always inculcate deep respect for God in the minds of others.
 1. We may not show blatant irreverence by engaging in obvious sacrilege, using profane speech, etc.
 2. But in a host of more “respectable” ways, we may demonstrate that we do not really take the Lord seriously.
- C. On the other hand, there is no greater help that we could give to the cause of the Lord than to faithfully reverence God before the watching eyes of the world. Cf. Ezek. 36:23.

III. SOME THINGS WE CANNOT DO IF WE TRULY REVERENCE GOD

A. We cannot be *indifferent* to God.

1. God is at the very center of all reality — there is no more vital, fundamental question than that of our relationship to Him.
2. We cannot indefinitely get away with treating God as if He were some peripheral concern, as if the whole question of God simply did not matter very much.
3. Our service to God must be “with reverence and godly fear” — He is “a consuming fire” (Hb. 12:18-29).

B. We cannot *accommodate* God to ourselves.

1. In many practical ways, we often attempt to domesticate God, to tame Him, to cut Him down to size.
2. We wish to make God respectable, to make His will convenient.
3. We work at fitting God to our lifestyle.
4. In short, we trifle with God: we presume to serve Him on our terms.
5. But real reverence means fitting ourselves to God, not vice versa - Mk. 8:34-38.

C. We cannot *confine* God to one compartment of life.

1. We put God in a box, confining Him to the “religious” part of our lives — as if it were none of His business to be regulating the “secular” part.
2. To reverence God, however, is to make an unconditional commitment to Him and His will - Col. 3:17.

D. We cannot *mock* God.

1. We treat God with contempt when we act as if we can disregard His commandments with impunity. Cf. Psa. 10:4,6,13; 14:1.
2. But reverence means taking God seriously when He says He will punish sin, even our own - Gal. 6:7,8.

IV. WHY REVERENCE IS SO IMPORTANT

A. Irreverence is, of course, a sin that is terrible enough when considered by itself — but the fact is, it is the cause of many other sins.

B. At the root of almost all our specific problems is the general problem that we just do not honor God as we should.

1. The people of Malachi’s day were guilty of a number of specific sins. Cf. list above for examples.
2. Yet the cause of all this sin was a wrong attitude toward God as He really is - Mal. 1:6. Cf. Rom. 1:21.

3. The problems we have in our interpersonal relationships, for example, result from defective attitudes toward God.
 4. Ultimately, there is not even any peace within our own hearts without reverence — the person will not be able to respect himself who does not truly respect God.
- C. Whatever specific sins may be in our lives, overcoming them almost always involves two basic things.
1. Gaining a proper concept of the character of God.
 2. Properly relating ourselves to God's true character.
- D. With respect to our relationship to God, there is no more fundamental concept than the reverence of God - Eccl. 12:13; 2 Cor. 7:1.

V. THE DIFFICULTY OF BEING HONEST ABOUT IRREVERENCE

- A. It is important to observe that those rebuked by Malachi for irreverence were not atheists or outwardly irreligious people.
1. These people were continuing to “worship” God, and they thought of themselves as being reverent.
 2. These were “churchgoing” folk whom the Lord charged with irreverence. Cf. Mt. 15:8; Tit. 1:16.
- B. Malachi's people were not only “out of touch with the living God,” they were out of touch with the fact that they were out of touch! They simply did not (or would not) see how they were dishonoring God - Mal. 1:6.
1. Consider the infamous “wherein” of the book of Malachi.
 2. To every charge of disrespect, the people answered: “In what way have we done that?” Cf. Mal. 1:6,7.
 3. Unfortunately, it is often the case that those guilty of insulting God in the worst way are not aware of what they are doing — they do not see themselves as they truly are. Cf. Rev. 3:15-19.
 4. One of the worst things about dishonoring God is the progressive blindness about ourselves that it causes.
- C. How honest are we about ourselves in relation to God's honor? To what extent are we willing to confront the truth about our real relationship to Him?

Conclusion

- A. In Malachi's day, it was the inner character and spirit of the Lord's people that needed “rebuilding.” What about in our day?

- B. It is no coincidence that Malachi's call to *reverence* is the Lord's last word in the Old Testament.
1. The New Testament opens with a call to *repentance*: with the kingdom of heaven "at hand," both John the Baptist (Mt. 3:2) and Jesus (Mt. 4:17) are preaching that only those who repent will be ready to enter the kingdom.
 2. If people cannot be ready for the kingdom without repentance, can they be ready for repentance without reverence?
 3. Was not Malachi anticipating the messianic call to repentance by calling for the reverence that would be the necessary precondition for repentance?
- C. Whether any of us, in the end, have been among those who honor the Lord, the Lord will ultimately defend His own honor - Mal. 1:11. Cf. Isa. 45:23 (Rom. 14:11); Phil. 2:9-11.
1. The Jews of Malachi's day looked forward to the coming of the Messiah; yet, for most of them, that coming would be something horribly different from what they expected - Mal. 3:1-3.
 2. Only those who truly respected the Lord would find that day to be one of blessing and joy - Mal. 3:16,17.
 3. Today we who are the true "Israel of God" (Gal. 6:16) are looking for the return of the Lord.
 4. If we have not respected God any more than the Jews to whom Malachi preached, what will that day hold for us?
 5. "Who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand when He appears?" (Mal. 3:2).
- D. Going to heaven requires an utterly serious, diligent approach to the matter - 1 Pt. 1:13-17. Cf. 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 Pt. 3:15.
- E. If God's will matters at all, it is all that matters.
- F. We need to "get real" — we need to "get basic" with God.
- G. Truly wonderful blessings await us when we relate ourselves to God in real reverence - Mal. 3:16,17; 4:2.

Practical Lessons from Malachi **WHAT PRIESTS ARE SUPPOSED TO DO**

Introduction

- A. When God conferred the priesthood upon the Levitical family of Aaron, He assigned vital responsibilities to them.
- B. Their various duties may be put under three general headings.
 - 1. *Officiating* in the various rituals of the tabernacle and temple service - Lev. 21:6.
 - 2. *Instructing* the nation in the Law of Moses - Lev. 10:11.
 - 3. *Adjudicating* disputes over application of the law to specific cases - Deut. 17:8-11.
- C. In these functions — presiding over the temple sacrifices and ceremonies, teaching what God's law required, and judging controverted cases between individuals — the priests were to play a critical role in seeing that Israel knew the Scriptures and worshiped properly.
 - 1. Their ministry would be a dominant influence upon the spiritual life of the nation.
 - 2. In short, the holiness God desired of His chosen people would depend heavily upon the exemplary character and function of the priests.

I. THE SINS OF THE PRIESTS IN MALACHI'S DAY

- A. When Malachi delivered his prophecy at the end of Old Testament history, the Levitical priesthood was, unfortunately, what it had often been since Sinai: corrupt, hypocritical, and a menace to the nation it was to have served.
- B. Malachi's message contained a forceful rebuke to these negligent and unscrupulous priests, and a plea for them to lead Israel in a renewal of its reverence for the Lord.
- C. The sins of which the Lord's priests were guilty are nothing less than shocking.
 - 1. *Refusing to reverence the Lord and despising His name* - Mal. 1:6.
 - 2. *Offering the blind, lame, sick, etc. as sacrifices* - Mal. 1:7,8.
 - 3. *Treating the altar as contemptible* - Mal. 1:7,12.
 - 4. *Treating the Lord's service as a wearisome drudgery* - Mal. 1:13.
 - 5. *Refusing to take the Lord's warning to heart* - Mal. 2:1,2.

6. *Corrupting the priestly covenant of Levi* - Mal. 2:4,5,8.
7. *Departing from the way of the Lord* - Mal. 2:8,9.
8. *Causing the people to stumble at the law* - Mal. 2:8.
9. *Showing partiality in the priestly functions* - Mal. 2:9.

D. If the priests would not repent of these sins, Malachi warned of consequences commensurate with the seriousness of their spiritual crimes.

1. Through the prophet, God said, “I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings” (Mal. 2:2).
 - a. This may mean that the priestly blessing of the people (Num. 6:22-27) would be turned into a curse. Cf. Deut. 10:8.
 - b. Or it may mean that the priestly portion of the people’s sacrifices, on which the priests depended for their sustenance, would be cursed.
2. Further, God promised, “I will rebuke your descendants” (Mal. 2:3). An alternate reading is “I will rebuke your *arm*,” i.e. the ability to perform the priestly sacrifices and blessings. Cf. 1 Sam. 2:31.
3. In addition, God said, “[I will] spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your solemn feasts; and one will take you away with it” (Mal. 2:3).
4. The repugnance of the image of dung being smeared on the faces of the priests indicates the abominableness of their actions as God saw them.
5. Finally, God spoke of a punishment that had already begun: “I also have made you contemptible and base before all the people” (Mal. 2:9).
 - a. The honor in which righteous priests were to be held had been forfeited; these men deserved contempt and disrepute.
 - b. This situation is full of irony: they having disrespected God for the purpose of courting human popularity, God saw to it that their reward was not greater public acclaim, but public mockery. Cf. 1 Sam. 2:30.

II. THE APPLICATION TO US TODAY

- A. These final Old Testament warnings to the wayward priests of the “covenant of Levi” (Mal. 2:8) are set within the context of Malachi’s messianic prophecy of a coming day when the “Messenger of the covenant” (Mal. 3:1) would “purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness” (Mal. 3:3).
 1. Surely this is a reference to the spiritual priesthood of us today who are privileged “to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ” (1 Pt. 2:5).
 2. We are the very occupants of this purged and purified priesthood, having entered into it by the obedience of faith.
- B. The honor and blessings of our priesthood before the world far surpass those of the sons of Aaron before Israel.
- C. But the greater honor entails greater responsibilities — and Malachi’s message ought to probe our consciences. Cf. Hb. 2:1-3.

D. Are we doing any better with our priesthood than the Levites were with theirs?

III. WHAT GOD IS EXPECTING OF US

A. Malachi describes the function of our priesthood no less than that of the Levites when he says, “The lips of a priest should keep knowledge, and people should seek the law from his mouth; for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts” (Mal. 2:7).

1. Ideally, the priest is “reverent” (Mal. 2:5), the “law of truth” is in his mouth (Mal. 2:6), and “injustice” is never found on his lips (Mal. 2:6).
2. He walks with God “in peace and equity” (Mal. 2:6), and he turns “many away from iniquity” (Mal. 2:6).

B. An important part of the priest’s work is to tell the people the will of God, and “that not simply as one who possesses it as a wonderful theory, but as one who is himself living within the realm thereof.” G. Campbell Morgan, *Malachi’s Message for Today* (1972 reprint), p. 33.

1. But woe to those priests, then and now, who have had exactly the opposite influence and “have caused many to stumble at the law” (Mal. 2:8).
2. It is sobering to contemplate what must be God’s full wrath against those whose ministry it is to represent Him to others, but who, in fact, have been the occasion of others turning their backs on Him.

Conclusion

A. There is no greater irreverence than that sometimes shown by the Lord’s own people — those whose very business it is to glorify the Lord!

B. The warning of Malachi gives no hope to priests (then and now) who, when admonished, “will not hear, and...will not take it to heart” (Mal. 2:2).

C. The obligation that rests upon each of us who is a Christian is to “adorn the doctrine of God our Savior in all things” (Tit. 2:10).

D. If we are failing to do that, the willingness to be warned may be the difference between being saved and being lost.

Practical Lessons from Malachi **THE TREACHERY OF DIVORCE**

Introduction

- A. Another evidence of Israel's irreverence toward God was their violation of His will regarding marriage.
- B. Since God's marriage law is so widely disrespected in our own culture, there is perhaps no sin in the Old Testament that has any more immediate interest for us right now than that of wrongdoing in regard to the marriage relationship.
 - 1. Although it is *relevant* to us, teaching on this subject is no more *popular* than in Malachi's day.
 - 2. In this instance, the description of Malachi's message as the "*burden* of the word of the Lord" (Mal. 1:1) is very appropriate.
- C. The sin of Israel with respect to marriage involved not just one kind of wrongdoing, but several.

I. ISRAEL'S VIOLATION OF GOD'S PROHIBITION AGAINST GENTILE MARRIAGES

- A. To begin with, there was the problem of intermarriage with "the daughter[s] of a foreign god" (Mal. 2:11).
 - 1. Many — some argue the priests in particular — were marrying Gentile women who were practitioners of idolatry, despite the clear prohibition of this in the Law of Moses - Exo. 34:12-17; Deut. 7:1-5.
 - 2. Both Ezra (Ezra 9:1,2) and Nehemiah (Neh. 10:30; 13:23-28) describe their distress at this situation.
 - 3. In calling for repentance, Nehemiah says, "I contended with them and cursed them, struck some of them and pulled out their hair" (Neh. 13:25).
- B. Malachi said that "Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem" (Mal. 2:11).
- C. He said the intermarriages had "profaned the Lord's holy institution which He loves" (Mal. 2:11).

1. This seems to mean that they had compromised the holiness of God's beloved chosen nation.
 2. God was not concerned about the maintenance of a pure physical bloodline, but rather, a pure religious character.
- D. True to God's original prediction, this inner holiness had always been contaminated when Israel took idolaters for their spouses (e.g. 1 Kgs. 11:1-8), and so it was in Malachi's day.

II. THE TREACHERY INVOLVED IN UNLAWFUL DIVORCE

- A. Another, and perhaps more fundamental, problem lay behind the pagan intermarriages of Israel.
- B. As if these were not bad enough, the men of Israel had been divorcing their original wives in order to marry the idolaters!
- C. Malachi charged, "The Lord has been witness between you and the wife of your youth, with whom you have dealt treacherously" (Mal. 2:14-16).
- D. He then asked, "Did He not make them one, having a remnant of the Spirit? And why one? He seeks godly offspring" (Mal. 2:15).
1. There are only a handful of texts in the Old Testament that are as hard as this one to translate and interpret.
 2. But perhaps Walter Kaiser is on the right track in his paraphrase: "Why did God make Adam and Eve only one flesh, when he might have given Adam many wives, for God certainly had more than enough of the Spirit, or his creative power, in reserve to furnish many partners? However, our God was seeking a godly offspring, and such plurality would not have been conducive to this result." Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Malachi: God's Unchanging Love* (1984), pp. 71,72.
- E. Concerning unlawful divorce, one thing to be considered is that a covenant is broken to which God Himself is a party - Mal. 2:14. Cf. 1 Sam. 20:8; 23:18.
1. Malachi says of the unlawfully divorced wife, "She is your companion and your wife by covenant" (Mal. 2:14).
 2. Centuries earlier, Solomon had said that the seductress "forsakes the companion of her youth, and forgets the covenant of God" (Prov. 2:17).
 3. Where promises to God are involved, it is better not to promise than to promise and later break the promise. Cf. Eccl. 5:1-7.
- F. But further, unlawful divorce is an act of injustice and violence perpetrated against one's mate - Mal. 2:16.
1. In view of the covenant involved, spouses ought to be able to rest their complete trust in the other's dependability.

2. When one betrays that confidence by divorce, Malachi says that he commits betrayal and treachery - Mal. 2:16.
3. In this light, unlawful divorce itself is seen to be a breaking of trust, an act of *infidelity* — to God and to one’s mate.
4. It is an injurious harm inflicted on one who has a right to expect safety and support.
5. To divorce one’s mate unlawfully is nothing less than to back out of a God-honored covenant, to show oneself to be false hearted, and to commit cruelty in the pursuit of one’s own will.
6. The treachery of divorce is seen especially in the fact that, in the New Testament, no provision at all is made for the remarriage of one who has been put away - Mt. 19:9.
 - a. Many argue that the wrongfully put away person must be able to remarry because it would be radically “unfair” for such to be disallowed.
 - b. No one denies the unfairness involved in an unlawful divorce — the unfairness, however, lies not in God’s requirement, but in the treachery of the one doing the putting away.
 - c. Unlawful divorce is indeed a very real victimization of a marriage partner — it is, unfortunately, one of many ways it is possible for us to be victimized in this life by sinful people.
 - d. Considering the situation created by unlawful divorce, how careful ought we to be in selecting the person to whom we will entrust ourselves in the vows of marriage!
7. The horrible injustice of an unscriptural divorce is reflected in Jesus’ statement that the one who does such a thing *causes* the one put away to commit adultery - Mt. 5:31,32.
8. An unscriptural divorce is the ultimately selfish and cruel act.

III. ANOTHER SERIOUS ASPECT OF UNLAWFUL DIVORCE

- A. As bad as it is, however, the wrong done to one’s mate is still not the end of the matter.
- B. Malachi says, “You cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and crying; so He does not regard the offering anymore, nor receive it with good will from your hands” (Mal. 2:12-14).
 1. The men of Israel could not understand why God was not pleased with their sacrifices, but they were fools to think He would accept the “worship” of men busy doing treachery and violence to their wives.
 2. The wives were weeping for the injustice done to them, and “the tears of these mistreated wives stood as an impenetrable barrier between the worshipers and Jehovah.” Homer Hailey, *A Commentary on the Minor Prophets* (1972), p. 416.
- C. Unless repentance is forthcoming, broken relationships with other human beings break our relationship with God — and those who contemplate unlawfully divorcing a spouse would do well to consider that it will be impossible to do so and continue to worship God right along.
 1. And what does repentance require?

2. The story of Onesimus and Philemon illustrates that repentance from the sin of broken commitments and broken relationships involves more than inward sorrow that a breach has occurred - Philemon 8-22.
 3. For the men of Malachi's day who had unlawfully put away their wives, there was treachery to be repented of, even in cases where no remarriage had been entered into.
 4. But whatever might have been required if no remarriage had taken place, it is clear from Ezra and Nehemiah that the men of Israel, having married women they had no right to be married to, could not again be in a worshiping relationship with God until they severed those marriages - Ezra 9:1-10:44; Neh. 13:23-27.
 5. It was not enough for these people to be sorry in their hearts that they had entered into marriages that were not right before God — God demanded that these marriages be dissolved, and the worship of these men would be repugnant to God until that took place.
- D. God simply will not submit Himself to the indignity of being worshiped by those who care nothing about the wrongs they have done to others - Mt. 5:23,24; 1 Pt. 3:7; etc.
- E. Injustice toward the creature stems from irreverence toward the Creator — and God does not accept the worship of those who do not reverence Him.

Conclusion

- A. Marriage cannot succeed without a high level of *commitment*.
1. Commitment is *implied* in the marriage *vows*.
 2. Commitment is *required* in the marriage *relationship*.
- B. God has said *not to divorce* one's mate.
1. In Jesus' words, "What God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt. 19:6).
 2. Only one scriptural exception to this is given - Mt. 19:9.
 3. Who is bold enough to add other reasons and affirm that man may with impunity do what God said not to do?
- C. Malachi's words are as clear as they are strong: "The Lord God of Israel says that He *hates divorce*, for it covers one's garment with violence" (Mal. 2:16).
- D. It is not without good reason that he added, "Take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously" (Mal. 2:16).
- E. It is all too obvious that Malachi's teaching on divorce is desperately needed today.
- F. Whether we have the commitment that is needed for our marriages to be what God wants them to be is largely determined by our view of divorce, i.e. the circumstances under which we think it might be an option.

- G. We need to accept the fact — and teach our young people — that the Lord allowed one and only one ground for divorce (Mt. 19:9), and that without that cause divorce is *under no circumstances* an option.
- H. Congregations of the Lord's people need to be prepared to take a firm stand in the matter of discipline when members violate the permanency of the marriage vows and refuse to repent of the sins involved.
- I. If we would take seriously the teaching of God's word that marriage is a *permanent, inviolable* relationship, we would have far fewer problems than we do at present.

Practical Lessons from Malachi **DOES OUR WORSHIP INSULT GOD?**

Introduction

- A. From the beginning of time, God has required worship of man.
 - 1. He has done this because worship is inherent in the Creator-creature relationship, not because He needs anything man is capable of giving to Him - Ac. 17:25.
 - 2. Man cannot survive spiritually without worship any more than he can survive physically without air to breathe.
- B. But mankind has not always maintained a true concept of the nature and purpose of worship, nor has he always done what God required in the actual practice of worship.
- C. It is an interesting fact that we can show *irreverence* to God in the way we *worship!*
- D. Malachi was called to prophesy to a people who had greatly perverted the divine worship — and his book deals with the irreverence that was being shown at the Lord's altar.

I. THE EMPTINESS OF WORSHIP THAT DOES NOT COME FROM THE HEART

- A. It is disheartening to think that, within a hundred years of the return of the first Jewish exiles from their Babylonian ordeal, their worship of God had already stagnated and become vain, but that was the case.
- B. And what God had to say about it is typical of everything else the Scriptures say about vain worship.
 - 1. The thing they were calling worship was worse than no worship at all — it was vain (empty, pointless, useless).
 - 2. The rebuke was blistering: “‘Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, so that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘nor will I accept an offering from your hands’” (Mal. 1:10,11).
- C. God evidently did not judge the crisis to be a minor one.
 - 1. The vain worship of Israel was not merely a futile exercise — it was offensive to God, an actual abomination to Him. Cf. Prov. 28:9.

2. Whatever else their sacrifices and ceremonies might have been good for, they were no good for pleasing the Lord — He did not accept them.
- D. Malachi addressed himself to a people who had, over time, settled down to a rather mechanical concept of worship — they imagined that performance of the bare act itself was sufficient to produce the desired result, regardless of the character, attitude, or intent of the worshiper.
 - E. What is more, they calculated that even the outward act could be trimmed and reduced to a convenient minimum - Mal. 1:6-14; 3:8-12.
 - F. Malachi's people seem to have had little sincerity or genuine reverence about their worship.
 1. Even when what they were doing was what had been commanded, their heart was not involved - Mal. 1:6.
 2. Isaiah's words (written many years earlier and quoted by the Lord in Mt. 15:8,9) are apropos: "These people draw near to Me with their mouths and honor Me with their lips, but have removed their hearts far from Me, and their fear toward Me is taught by the commandment of men" (Isa. 29:13).
 - G. Malachi was simply the last in a long line of prophets God had sent to admonish Israel for the meaningless, useless way it worshiped.

II. THE CONNECTION BETWEEN WORSHIP AND CHARACTER

- A. There was widespread social corruption and injustice among Malachi's people: the Lord said, "I will come near you for judgment; I will be a swift witness against sorcerers, against adulterers, against perjurers, against those who exploit wage earners and widows and the fatherless, and against those who turn away an alien — because they do not fear Me" (Mal. 3:5).
- B. The populace seems not to have considered how offensive to God these social sins rendered their worship.
 1. They were indifferent to the vital connection between acceptable worship and godly character.
 2. Failing to understand that God was looking for obedience, purity of life, and holiness in the inner man, they evidently assumed God would be pleased with their rituals irrespective of what they were doing outside the temple precincts. Cf. Mt. 23:23-28.
- C. But Samuel had asked Saul the pertinent question centuries before: "Has the Lord as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the Lord? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to heed than the fat of rams" (1 Sam. 15:22). Cf. Deut. 10:12; Mic. 6:6-8.

- D. In the New Testament, we learn that “to love [God] with all the heart, with all the understanding, with all the soul, and with all the strength, and to love one’s neighbor as oneself, is more than all the whole burnt offerings and sacrifices” (Mk. 12:33).
1. Jesus rebuked those of His day for their confusion about what God desires from man.
 2. On more than one occasion, in exhorting the ritualistic and self-righteous Pharisees, He quoted Hos. 6:6, where God had said, “I desire mercy and not sacrifice, and the knowledge of God more than burnt offerings.” Cf. Mt. 9:13; 12:7.
- E. Today, we sorely need the teaching of the Scriptures concerning the relationship between worship and the way we live. Cf. 1 Pt. 3:7.
1. If we think that we can speak with an unbridled tongue (Jas. 1:26), turn a deaf ear to the pleas of the disadvantaged (Jas. 1:27), indulge in secret immorality (1 Tim. 2:8), live lives of bitterness, hostility, and enmity (Mt. 5:23,24), mistreat our wives (1 Pt. 3:7), etc., and then come and bow our heads piously before the table of the Lord on His day, we are badly mistaken.
 2. One of the Proverbs says simply, “One who turns away his ear from hearing the law, even his prayer shall be an abomination” (Prov. 28:9).
 3. And God said through Isaiah, “I cannot endure iniquity and the sacred meeting” (Isa. 1:13). Cf. Isa. 1:10-15.
 4. God’s answer to the problem of inconsistency between our way of life and our worship is found in Isa. 1:16,17.
- F. To live unrighteously and then to go through the motions of righteous worship is to make a mockery of all that worship is intended to be — it is to treat God Himself with an offhanded contempt worse even than blasphemy.
- G. God has always been more patient with hatred in His foes than hypocrisy in His friends.

III. THE SIN OF OFFERING THE LORD OUR LEFTOVERS

- A. In Malachi’s day, however, the worship of Israel had one other fault: it was a worship of mere convenience, rather than of true sacrifice.
- B. God said, “Will a man rob God? Yet you have robbed Me! But you say, ‘In what way have we robbed You?’ In tithes and offerings” (Mal. 3:8).
- C. Those to whom Malachi preached were offering animals that were blind, lame, sick, and possibly even stolen - Mal. 1:8,13,14.
1. According the Law of Moses, each animal to be sacrificed as a burnt offering to the Lord was to be without blemish of any kind; it was to be the very best the offerer had - Lev. 22:17-25; Deut. 17:1; etc.
 2. Malachi’s people were doing less by God than by their civil rulers: “Offer it then to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you favorably?” (Mal. 1:8).

3. What was happening amounted to an effort to swindle the Lord: “But cursed be the deceiver who has in his flock a male, and makes a vow, but sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished” (Mal. 1:14).
 4. “Only a desire to be something in public that one was not in one’s own heart could have led to this type of showmanship.” Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *Malachi: God’s Unchanging Love* (1984), p. 50.
- D. King David, of course, had exemplified the correct attitude about offerings to the Lord — when Araunah offered to donate to David the materials for a sacrifice, David replied, “No, but I will surely buy it from you for a price; nor will I offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God with that which costs me nothing” (2 Sam. 24:24).
- E. It represents no great love for the Lord to “sacrifice” to Him whatever one can easily get along without — Jesus said of the poor widow who dropped two mites into the temple treasury, “[She] has put in more than all those who have given to the treasury; for they all put in out of their abundance, but she out of her poverty put in all that she had, her whole livelihood” (Mk. 12:43,44).
- F. Though today the Lord does not require tithes and animal sacrifices, we still need Malachi’s admonition.
1. We are the Gentiles among whom the Lord said, “My name shall be great” (Mal. 1:11).
 2. Our offering to Him must be “a pure offering” (Mal. 1:11).
 3. Whether it is time, money, or ourselves we are contributing to the Lord’s cause, it will have to be more than the surplus we skim off of our abundance.
- G. The Hebrew writer urged, “Let us have grace, by which we may serve God acceptably with reverence and godly fear. For our God is a consuming fire” (Hb. 12:28,29).
- H. God will not be mocked with our leftovers.

Conclusion

- A. The worship which Malachi condemned was one which trifled with the greatness of God.
1. It was of the sort described by Solomon as “the sacrifice of fools” (Eccl. 5:1).
 2. It insulted God by using Him as a means to selfish ends — it was something in which the worshipers sought maximum carnal gains from minimum spiritual investments.
- B. The people had grown tired of playing even this game.
1. They were slouching through their rituals with the sneer, “Oh, what a weariness!” (Mal. 1:13).
 2. Their perfunctory and slovenly worship had become little more than a drudgery.

- C. Malachi warned in no uncertain terms that Israel was wasting what time they did spend in this chore.
- D. Until the day when their worship could be an expression of loving reverence for the Lord of hosts, the doors of the temple should remain shut - Mal. 1:10.
- E. Today, when we worship the Lord as His people, we need to recover the reverence with which God ought to be worshiped.
- F. When we worship reverently, genuinely, and sacrificially great blessings are in store for us — nowhere is the principle of sowing and reaping more true than in our worship. Cf. 2 Cor. 9:6-8.

Practical Lessons from Malachi

RESPECTING THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RIGHT AND WRONG

Introduction

- A. The Jews of Jerusalem to whom Malachi prophesied held some very confused notions about right and wrong.
- B. This mixed-up thinking about good and evil was yet another symptom of their underlying sin of irreverence toward God.
- C. None of the forms of irreverence confronted by Malachi are any more prevalent in our own age than this failure to judge rightly in regard to moral distinctions.

I. THE PROBLEM

- A. It is an ominous sign when God points out sin in the lives of His people and has to say, “Is it not evil?” (Mal. 1:8) — as if His people did not have sufficient powers of moral discernment to see the obvious.
- B. The prophet accused them of having “weari[ed] the Lord” with their words - Mal. 2:17.
 - 1. They had said, “Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them” (Mal. 2:17) — judging that God’s treatment of the wicked (perhaps the nations around Israel) was better than His treatment of the righteous.
 - 2. They had asked, “Where is the God of justice?” (Mal. 2:17) — implying that God was not acting fairly.
- C. The Lord charged them with having used “harsh” words against Him - Mal. 3:13.
 - 1. They had said, “It is vain to serve God; what profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, and that we have walked as mourners before the Lord of hosts?” (Mal. 3:14) — arguing that their personal service to God had gotten them nothing. Cf. Job 21:14,15.
 - 2. They had concluded, “So now we call the proud blessed, for those who do wickedness are raised up; yes, those who tempt God go free” (Mal. 3:15) — insinuating that it would actually be wiser to be wicked.

- D. Yet, the Lord anticipated a coming day: “Then you shall again discern between the righteous and the wicked, between one who serves God and one who does not serve Him” (Mal. 3:18).
1. Among the Jews at the end of the Old Testament, there was an ignorant disregard of the difference between the righteous and the wicked — and a cynical denial that it made any difference whether a person was one or the other.
 2. But in the day of the Messiah, the coming “Messenger of the covenant” (Mal. 3:1), the Lord’s faithful people would make this clear distinction again.

II. DIFFERENT VERSIONS OF THE PROBLEM

- A. Denial that there is any objective or fixed *standard* of right and wrong, moral relativity, situation ethics, etc.
- B. Denial that there is any *difference* at all between right and wrong.
1. The “monistic” worldlier is gaining popularity in our culture.
 2. According to this view, all reality is “one” — all differences and distinctions are denied as illusion (*maya*, darkness).
 3. Scott Peck speaks for this view when he writes, “So it is that mystics of all cultures and religions speak in terms of paradox — not in terms of *either/or* but in terms of *both/and*.” M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum* (1987), p. 220.
- C. Outright disregard for moral differences, willful substitution of wrong for right, perversion of moral values - Isa. 5:20. One cannot help but think of the modern acceptance of abortion, homosexuality, obscenity, etc.
- D. Double standards, failure to identify our own evil, the tendency to make exceptions for ourselves - “Is it not evil?” (Mal. 1:8).
- E. Resentment that those who do not even try to do right sometimes seem to have it better than those who do - Mal. 2:17. Cf. Psa. 73:1-28.
- F. Skepticism that God will punish evil - Mal. 3:15. Cf. Zeph. 1:12; Gal. 6:7-9.
- G. Skepticism that God will reward righteousness - Mal. 3:14.
1. It has always been tempting to be cynical about rewards and punishments, to give in to the view that it does not make any real difference whether one tries to do right or not. Cf. Job 2:9.
 2. But faith requires us to believe that God does reward obedience, that He does treat the righteous different than the unrighteous - Hb. 11:6. Cf. Gal. 6:7-9.
- H. Failure to distinguish between righteous and wicked *people* - Mal. 3:18. Cf. Psa. 15:4.

- I. Ignorance, inability/unwillingness to discern right from wrong, blunted powers of moral discrimination, hardened conscience, etc. Cf. Eph. 4:17-19.

III. REASONS FOR THE PROBLEM

- A. One reason we fail to adequately respect the difference between right and wrong is that so much of our thinking is short-term thinking.
 - 1. Our assessment of whether it does any good to do good often disregards the future judgment of God. Cf. 1 Cor. 15:19.
 - 2. And then, we frequently do not even take a very long view of causes and consequences in this life. Cf. 1 Tim. 4:8. (We make up our minds about the story on the basis of the first few chapters, not the entire book!)
- B. But another reason for the problem, perhaps a more important one, is that some of the time we simply have not obeyed God consistently enough to experience “the difference that it makes to make a difference” between right and wrong — we have not really tried Christianity!
 - 1. Often it does not appear to us that it does any good to distinguish between right and wrong because we have never really done that and lived consistently on the basis of that distinction.
 - 2. We have done little more than dabble with righteousness and then wondered why there were so few “benefits” — we have judged God’s standards after no more than a half-hearted experiment with using them.
 - 3. “Christianity has not been tried and found wanting; it has been found difficult and not tried” (G. K. Chesterton).
 - 4. The Psalmist urged us to “Taste and see that the Lord is good” (Psa. 34:8) — and those who have done so “have tasted that the Lord is gracious” (1 Pt. 2:3).
 - 5. Through Malachi, God challenged His people to “prove” Him, to put Him to the test and actually see, in the course of real obedience, if it does not make a difference to do right - Mal. 3:10.

IV. THE SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

- A. To say, either in word or deed, that right and wrong do not matter is to make an accusation against God - Mal. 3:13.
 - 1. It is to imply that God is not telling the truth when He says that there is such a thing as right and wrong and that these matter. Cf. Gen. 3:1.
 - 2. It is to imply that God will not do as He says about rewarding right and punishing wrong - Gal. 6:7.
- B. One of the horrible things about the failure to deal honestly and realistically with right and wrong is that, uncorrected, the problem grows worse and worse — to the point where we

become virtually blind and incapable of seeing the difference - Rom. 1:21-32; 2 Thess. 2:9-12; 2 Tim. 3:13.

- C. The human ability to make moral discriminations is a high gift, one to be guarded and cultivated.
 - 1. When we exercise our faculty for judgment, we are commanded to “judge with righteous judgment” (Jn. 7:24) — that means seeing things as they really are, recognizing distinctions that actually exist, not the least of which are those between right and wrong.
 - 2. It is a very serious charge to be described as “judges with evil thoughts” (Jas. 2:4).
- D. Ultimately, we will properly respect what God says about right and wrong when we properly respect *Him* - Mal. 1:6; 3:16-18.

Conclusion

- A. There is a radical difference between right and wrong, good and evil.
- B. This distinction exists because it is inherent in the very character of God, the Creator of the reality that we are a part of.
- C. We live life at its best when we reverently honor the rules of reality, and God their Source.
- D. God can be counted on to be true to the principles of His own character — and to reward us when we do so.
- E. “Surely there is a reward for the righteous; surely He is God who judges in the earth” (Psa. 58:11).

Practical Lessons from Malachi

JESUS CHRIST, THE MESSENGER OF THE COVENANT

Introduction

- A. As was typical of the prophets, Malachi laid great stress on the covenant of God with His people — and on the unfaithfulness of Israel to that covenant.
- B. Had it not been for God's faithfulness to His covenant with Abraham (Gen. 15:18; 17:2; etc.) and the covenant He made with Israel at Sinai (Exo. 19:5,6; 34:27; etc.), the nation would long since have passed away with other peoples under the righteous judgment of God: "For I am the Lord, I do not change; therefore you are not consumed, O sons of Jacob" (Mal. 3:6).
- C. Despite the Lord's steadfast love, however, Israel had not kept the covenant: "From the days of your fathers you have gone away from My ordinances and have not kept them" (Mal. 3:7).
- D. Malachi deplored the sins of the people for what they were: covenant violations.
 - 1. The priestly corruptions, for example, were transgressions of the "covenant of Levi" (Mal. 2:8; cf. 2:4,5).
 - 2. Similarly, in regard to the pagan intermarriages Malachi said, "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why do we deal treacherously with one another by profaning the covenant of the fathers?" (Mal. 2:10).

I. ISRAEL'S IRREVERENCE TOWARD GOD

- A. Conditions in and around Jerusalem after the Babylonian exile did not appear to be consistent with God's promise of blessing to His reinstated people, and the people themselves could think of nothing to attribute this to except God's indifference. Cf. Jdg. 6:13.
- B. Yet certain blessings of the covenant were clearly dependent on obedience to the Law of Moses (Deut. 28), and Malachi saw with a clear eye exactly what the problem was: the God of the covenant was being dishonored in the hearts of Israel.
 - 1. The Lord of hosts was being cheated (Mal. 1:14), robbed (Mal. 3:8), sneered at (Mal. 1:13), insulted and treated with contempt (Mal. 1:7,12).

2. Harsh words were being spoken against Him (Mal. 3:13), His name was being profaned (Mal. 1:12), His justice was being called into question (Mal. 2:17), and His patience was being worn thin by their words (Mal. 2:17).
 3. The people denied that God loved them (Mal. 1:2), and they had openly begun to doubt there was any advantage in serving God, complaining that God blessed the wicked more than the righteous (Mal. 3:14,15).
- C. From our vantage point, it is nearly incredible that these backsliders were still expecting God's blessing!
- D. There was irreverence piled upon irreverence — yet, despite all this, Israel was blindly ignorant that she had a problem.
- E. When God said they were despising His name, their dumbfounded response was: “In what way have we despised Your name?” (Mal. 1:6).

II. ISRAEL'S MAINTENANCE OF AN OUTWARD FORM OF WORSHIP

- A. To read the horrible ways in which God said they had shown disrespect to Him, we might easily think of them as blatant sinners who had departed from the Lord altogether.
- B. It is crucial to note, however, that these covenant-breakers in Israel were not in open rebellion against God.
- C. These were men and women, perhaps not totally unlike ourselves, who, to borrow Paul's words, had “a form of godliness” (2 Tim. 3:5) but denied the power of it.
1. If they were shaving the corners a bit, still they were continuing to go through most of the outward motions of the public worship of God.
 2. Their sins were religiously “respectable,” and their problem was on the inside, where only God sees.
 3. From God's perspective, they were worse than blatant sinners. Cf. Lk. 18:9-14.
- D. Is it not possible that God at times sees in us the same shallowness of faith, the same selfishness, the same compromise, the same weariness with worship — in short, the same basic lack of reverence that plagued Israel?
- E. If so, we need to hear Malachi's warning. Cf. Rom. 15:4; 1 Cor. 10:11.

III. LOOKING FORWARD TO THE COMING OF THE CHRIST

- A. There were those in Malachi's day, as there have always been, who had such a grossly inadequate understanding of their own sins that they looked forward to the day when God would pour out His vengeance on “the wicked.”

- B. And Malachi left no doubt that a day of reckoning was ahead: “Behold, the day is coming, burning like an oven, and all the proud, yes, all who do wickedly will be stubble. And the day which is coming shall burn them up” (Mal. 4:1).
- C. But if Israel welcomed this punitive aspect of the Messiah’s coming, they might be surprised to find themselves among those burned up.
 - 1. “And the Lord, whom you seek, will suddenly come to His temple, even the Messenger of the covenant, in whom you delight. Behold, He is coming...But who can endure the day of His coming? And who can stand when He appears? For He is like a refiner’s fire and like fuller’s soap. He will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver; He will purify the sons of Levi, and purge them as gold and silver, that they may offer to the Lord an offering in righteousness” (Mal. 3:1-3).
 - 2. For those who had trifled with the awesome holiness of God, the coming of the Messiah would not be a joyful event.

IV. THOSE TO WHOM THE MESSIAH WOULD BRING JOY

- A. But in addition to those who had no respect for God, Malachi also spoke of a righteous remnant who did fear Him.
- B. For these, the Messiah *would* bring joy.
 - 1. “Then those who feared the Lord spoke to one another, and the Lord listened and heard them; so a book of remembrance was written before Him for those who fear the Lord and who meditate on His name. ‘They shall be mine,’ says the Lord of hosts, ‘on the day that I make them My jewels. And I will spare them as a man spares his own son who serves him’” (Mal. 3:16,17).
 - 2. The Lord continues, “To you who fear My name the Sun of Righteousness shall arise with healing in His wings; and you shall go out and grow fat like stall-fed calves. You shall trample the wicked, for they shall be ashes under the soles of your feet on the day that I do this” (Mal. 4:2,3).
- C. To those who knew what true reverence meant, the coming of the Messiah would be as the morning rise of the life-giving sun with healing in its rays.

V. ONE WHO WOULD PREPARE THE WAY

- A. Before the Messiah came, however, another figure was to come.
- B. Through the prophet, God said, “Behold, I send My messenger, and he will prepare the way before Me” (Mal. 3:1).
- C. And at the very end of the prophecy, God foretold, “Behold, I will send you Elijah the prophet before the coming of the great and dreadful day of the Lord. And he will turn the

hearts of the fathers to the children, and the hearts of the children to their fathers, lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:5,6).

1. No Old Testament prophecy is interpreted any more clearly in the New Testament than this one.
2. It is a prophecy of John the Baptist, whose work it was to proclaim the repentance from sin without which Christ and His kingdom could not be received - Mt. 11:10-14; 17:10-13; Mk. 1:1-4; Lk. 1:17,76; Jn. 1:23; 3:28.

VI. GOD’S LAST WORD TO ISRAEL BEFORE THE COMING OF THE MESSIAH

- A. At the end of Malachi, we come to “the end of the end” of the Old Testament.
- B. The sad story of Old Testament Israel’s role in the scheme of redemption was complete.
 1. God had brought Israel into nationhood and entered into His covenant with her.
 2. He had sustained her, blessed her, preached to her, punished her, restored her.
 3. Yet after all this, Israel persisted in irreverent sin.
- C. Through Malachi, God issued one last call for repentance — announcing the coming of one who would prepare the way for the Messiah and proclaiming the advent of the Messiah Himself.
- D. There was nothing more that God could do or say to Israel until “the fullness of the time had come” (Gal. 4:4,5) four hundred years later — at which time the message of repentance would again be sounded to herald the inauguration of the Messiah’s kingdom.

Conclusion

- A. Malachi’s prophecy ends with this threat of the Lord, “Lest I come and strike the earth with a curse” (Mal. 4:6).
 1. The Gospel of John says, “The law was given through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ” (Jn. 1:17).
 2. Placing the law of the Old Covenant over against the grace of the New Covenant, many commentators point out that Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament, ends with the word *curse*, while Revelation, the last book in the New Testament, ends on a note of *blessing*. Cf. Rev. 22:21.
 3. It is surely not a coincidence that these two parts of the Bible end as they do.
- B. The blessing of the New Covenant notwithstanding, we had better be careful not to underestimate the relevance of Malachi’s curse to ourselves.
 1. In this age of grace, it is just as necessary for us to reverence God as it was for the Jews of ancient Jerusalem to do so.

2. If we do not hold God in our hearts with genuine godly fear, Malachi's curse will fall on us as surely it did on those of his own day.
3. If we do not fear God and serve Him accordingly, the coming of the Christ at the end of time to judge the world will hold for us the same terrible prospect that His coming into the world held for the Jews of Malachi's day.

C. God requires that we honor and respect Him, not only in word but also in deed.

1. He seeks from us a worship that is truly worship: one that heeds His instructions, and one that springs from hearts of love and faith.
2. He requires that we take Him seriously and not trifle with His greatness.
3. He requires, in short, that we *fear His name*.

D. As in Malachi's day, so in ours, God's words roll thunderously down from heaven: "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am the Father, where is My honor? And if I am a Master, where is My reverence?" (Mal. 1:6).