

Stewardship

Lesson #1

Malachi

The sinful priests (1:1-2:9)
Jacob loved, Esau hated (1:2-5)
Blemished sacrifices (1:6-14)
Admonition for the priests (2:1-9)
The sinful people (2:10-3:15)
Judah unfaithful (2:10-16)
The day of judgment (2:17-3:5)
Robbing God (3:6-15)
The faithful few (3:16-4:6)
The day of the Lord (4:1-6)

The Times

About 100 years had passed since the return of the Jews to Palestine. The city of Jerusalem & the second Temple had been built, but initial enthusiasm had worn off. Following a period of revival under Nehemiah (Neh 10:28-39), the people & priests had backslidden & become mechanical in their observance of the law. Though lax in their worship (1:7) & delinquent in their tithing (3:8), they could not understand why God was dissatisfied with them.

Purpose & Theme

Malachi rebuked the people for their neglect of the true worship of the Lord & called for repentance (1:6; 3:7).

Contents

Malachi used a question-&-answer method, there being no fewer than 23 questions in the book. Malachi ministered about 430 B.C. He followed Haggai & Zechariah. Haggai & Zechariah rebuked the people for their failure to rebuild the temple. Malachi confronted them with their neglect of the temple & their false & profane worship.

The priests of Malachi's time were indifferent to the rules of worship (1:6-14), & the people themselves had become apathetic about their offerings to God (3:6-12). Where did this neglectful attitude come from? The motives of the Jewish people have often been based upon greed. If God is blessing us, where is the proof? Where's the \$\$\$\$\$\$. Their view of prosperity was tied directly to \$\$\$\$\$. As we know, God does not judge a person's life based simply on money & success. God judges us on faithfulness.

In Depth—Blemished Sacrifices

Why should the condition of a sacrifice matter to God? He created all things, defective animals as well as the healthy ones. Why would He not accept gifts that were flawed? Why did God care so much to have his messenger Malachi speak so strongly?

The imperfect sacrifices of the priests & people demonstrated the content of their hearts. The people were not sincere. To sacrifice a perfect, healthy animal looked

to them like a waste, & they considered the work of preparing their gifts properly to be a foolish use of time & energy. Malachi confronted this attitude with the Law of God, which clearly demanded unblemished sacrifices & sincere hearts (see [Lev. 1:3](#); [3:1](#); [Deut. 17:1](#)). Malachi also confronted the people with God's judgment of their actions. God was perfectly aware of what they were doing & the condition of their hearts. No sacrifices at all would have been better than second-rate & insincere ones. The people were not giving "sacrifices"; they were merely doing what was convenient, just enough to appear to obey God. Then they would turn around & pat themselves on the back for being righteous. But even though God's people had broken their covenant with Him, God remained true to His promises (see [Isa. 53](#)). He did not shrink from sending His only Son to a cruel death on the Cross. Jesus was the true, unblemished sacrifice to which the Old Testament sacrifices pointed ([Heb. 7:26-28](#)). He was perfect—free from all sin. & through Jesus' sacrificial death the Lord provided salvation for all of our sins. In doing this, the Lord demonstrated His sincere love for us because He sacrificed the very best to save us ([John 3:16](#))

Their misunderstanding about how God works caused their halfhearted response to Him. Their apathy toward God was also reflected in their relations with other people—especially their spouses. It had become common at this time for men to divorce their wives. Such men ignored the fact that the Lord was a witness to their marriages, & as a result God ignored their offerings. The prophecy of Malachi is God's response to this "loveless" condition.

Malachi rebuked the people & the priests for neglecting the worship of God & failing to live according to God's will. If the priests were unfaithful, how could they lead the people? They had become stumbling blocks instead of spiritual leaders. If the people were divorcing their wives & marrying pagan women, how could they lead their children? Their relationship to God had become inconsequential. When our relationship with God becomes less important than it should be, we can strengthen it by setting aside our sinful habits, thinking often of our Lord, & giving God our best each day. We know very little about this next to the last of the OT prophets. John the Baptist was the last—[Mal. 3:1](#) & [4:5-6](#) with [Matt. 11:10-15](#), [Mark 1:2](#), & [Luke 1:17](#). The sins described in this book are found in [Neh. 13:10-30](#). Malachi directs his first message to the priests, & then he turns to the people collectively—"Like people, like priest." As the prophet delivers God's Word, the people respond by arguing. Note the repeated "Wherein?" ([1:2](#), [6-7](#); [2:17](#); [3:7-8](#), [13](#)). It is a dangerous thing when people argue with God & try to defend their sinful ways. So, Malachi points out the terrible sins of the people & the priests.

I. They Doubted His Love (1:1-5)

Mal 1:2 I have loved you, saith the LORD. Yet ye say, Wherein hast thou loved us? The people were skeptical. "Oh? Really? Prove it." Doubting God's love is the beginning of unbelief & disobedience. Eve doubted God's love & ate of the forbidden tree; she thought God was holding out on her. Satan wants us to feel neglected by God. "Look at your difficult circumstances," he said to the Jewish remnant. "Where are the crops? Why doesn't God take care of you?"

God proves His love to His people in two ways: (1) He graciously chose Jacob, their father, & rejected Esau; & (2) He judged the Edomites (Esau's descendants) & gave to Israel the best of the lands. He promised Israel a land flowing with milk & honey, but, alas, their sins polluted the land. Even then, God graciously restored them to their land & delivered them from captivity.

II. They Despised His Name (1:6-14)

Now God turns to the priests, who should have been the spiritual leaders of the land. The priests were not giving honor to God's name; they were taking the best for themselves. They did not value the spiritual privileges God gave them: serving at the altar, burning the incense, & eating the dedicated showbread. The priests did not offer the best for the sacrifices: they brought the poorest of the animals. God gave them His very best, & He asked for their best in return, but they would not obey Him.

1:10 Who is there even among you that would shut the doors for nought? neither do ye kindle fire on mine altar for nought. I have no pleasure in you, saith the LORD of hosts, neither will I accept an offering at your hand.

Verse 10 shut the doors: In a choice between service without gratitude & no service at all, God chose the second. **pleasure:** The word describes God's desire to smile at & bless the true worship from a godly people (Ps. 40:6-8; 147:10, 11). This shows that God would rather see the temple closed than to have the people & the priests "playing at religion" & keeping the best for themselves. The priests would not even offer a sacrifice until they had first gotten their share. It was this kind of sin that brought defeat to Israel back in Eli's day (1 Sam. 2:12-17 & 4:1-18).

Verse 11 states that the "heathen Gentiles" were offering better sacrifices to the Lord than were His own people. It is too bad when unsaved people sacrifice more for their religion than do those of us who truly know the Lord.

We are priests through Christ, & we too are to bring "spiritual sacrifices" to Him (1 Peter 2:5). What are these sacrifices? Our bodies (Rom. 12:1-2); our offerings (Phil. 4:14-18); praise (Heb 13:15); good works (Heb 13:16); souls we have won to Christ (Rom. 15:16). Are we bringing Him our best or only what is convenient for us?

III. They Defiled His Covenant (2:1-17)

It was no light thing to be a priest, for this was a gracious gift of God through His covenant with Levi. **Verses 5-7** describe the ideal priest: he fears the Lord & obeys Him; he receives the Word & teaches it; he lives what he teaches; he seeks to turn others from sin. But the priests in Malachi's day actually led people astray (2:8) & defiled the holy covenant.

What would God do to them? "I will curse your blessings." This ties in with 3:9 & the lack of tithes & offerings. God cursed the crops; the people were poor; they did not bring the offerings to the priests; therefore the priests went hungry. In sinning against God's covenant they were only hurting themselves. But w. 10-16 point out another terrible sin of the priests: they divorced their Jewish wives & married heathen women. They dealt treacherously against the women & their families; see Ex. 34:10-17, Ezra 9:1-4, Neh. 13:23-31. All their weeping at the altar (2:13) could not change things; they had to put away their sins. Read v. 15 like this: "Did not the Lord make husband & wife one? Why?

That you might bring forth a godly family." Actually, the nation's looseness about divorce was endangering the promise of the Seed, Christ. God hates divorce; it is the breaking of the covenant between husband & wife & between them & God.

IV. They Disobeyed His Word (3:1-15)

In 2:17 the people had scornfully asked, "Will God punish us for our sins? Does He really care?" God answers them by promising to send His messenger (John the Baptist) who would announce the Messenger of the covenant (Jesus Christ). Jesus did come into the temple & expose its sins & purify its courts. In His ministry He revealed the sins of the religious leaders, so much so that they finally crucified Him. Of course, there is a future application here when the Day of the Lord refines Israel & separates the true from the false. Why does the Lord not simply do away with His rebellious people? Verse 6 is the answer: He changes not & must be true to His promises (Lam. 3:22).

The people had disobeyed God by robbing Him of tithes & offerings. Actually, when God's people are not faithful in their giving, they not only rob God, but they also rob them themselves. God had shut off the rain & spoiled the crops because of their selfishness. Tithing, of course, is not "making a bargain with God"; but God does promise to bless & care for those who are faithful in their stewardship (Phil. 4:10-19). Certainly God is not bankrupt; He wants our tithes & offerings as expressions of our faith & love. When a believer's love for Christ grows cold, it usually shows up in the area of stewardship. If every church member would bring the Lord His due (10 percent of the income, the tithe), & then add offerings (as an expression of gratitude), our local churches would have more than enough for their ministries. & they would be able to share generously with the many other good ministries that deserve support.

Malachi closes his message with some wonderful promises to the faithful (3:16-4:6). There was that faithful remnant in this day who did not forsake God's house, but who met together for worship (3:16-18; Heb. 10:25). "They are My jewels," says the Lord. What a beautiful picture of the faithful believer. Jewels are precious, & we are precious in His sight. He purchased us with His blood. He is polishing us with trials & testings; & one day in glory we shall shine in beauty & splendor.

Christ is pictured as the Sun of Righteousness. To the church, He is the "Bright & Morning Star" (Rev. 22:16; 2:28), for He will appear when the hour is darkest to take His church home. But to Israel, He is the Sun, bringing the "Day of the Lord," a day that will mean burning to the lost, but healing to saved Jews & Gentiles. "Elijah" in 4:5-6 refers to John the Baptist (Matt. 17:10-13; Mark 9:11-13), but it has a reference also to one of the two witnesses spoken of in Rev. 11. The last word in our English OT is "curse." At the end of the NT we read, "& there shall be no more curse" (Rev. 22:3). The difference? Jesus Christ.

LEFTOVERS

1:2-8 God accused Israel of dishonoring him by offering imperfect sacrifices. Our life should be a living sacrifice to God (Romans 12:1). If we give God only our leftover time, money, & energy, we repeat the same sin as these worshipers who didn't want to bring anything valuable to God. What we give reflects our true attitude toward God.

CHOSEN

1:11 A theme that runs through the Old Testament is affirmed in this book—"My name is honored by people of other nations. . . . My name is great among the nations." God had a chosen people, the Jews, through whom He planned to bless the entire world. Today God still wants to save & bless the world through his people, but now his people are all those who believe in him— Jews & Gentiles. Our pure offering to the Lord is our new life in Christ (2 Cor 2:14-15). Are you willing for God to use you in making his name great to the nations, beginning in your home & neighborhood?

HOLDING BACK

3:6-12 Malachi urged the people not to hold back their gifts to the priests, their "tithes." Tithing began during Moses' time (Lev 27:30-34; Deut 14:22). The Levites received some of the tithe because they couldn't have land (Num 18:20-21). During Malachi's day, the tithes were not used to support God's workers, so the Levites had to go to work. God has given us everything. When we refuse to return to Him a part of what He has given, we rob him. Do you selfishly want to keep all you've been given, or are you willing to return the first part for advancing God's kingdom?

WHY SERVE GOD?

3:13-15 These verses deal with the people's arrogant attitude toward God. When we say "What good does it do to serve God?" we really are saying "What good does it do for me?" Our focus is selfish. Our real question should be, "What good does it do for God?" We must serve God just because he is God & deserves it.

JOY

4:6 Malachi gives us practical guidelines about commitment to God. God deserves the best we have to offer (1:7-10). We must be willing to change our wrong ways of living (2:1-2), to make family a priority (2:13-16), to be ready for God's refining process (3:3), to tithe (3:8-12), & to forget pride (3:13-15). Malachi closes his message by pointing to the day of judgment. For those committed to God, it will be a day of joy, of ushering in eternity in God's presence. Those who have ignored God will be "straw" to be burned up (4:1). To help people prepare for that day, God was to send a prophet (John the Baptist). The New Testament begins with this prophet calling the people to turn from their sins & turn toward God. Such a commitment to God demands great sacrifice on our part, but we can be sure it will be worth it all in the end.

Moral Dilemma—MESMERIZED

Last Sunday, Byron & John fidgeted their way through the morning worship service, mumbled their way through the songs, daydreamed their way through the prayers, & whispered & passed notes as the minister delivered his message. In short, they went through the motions of worshiping God, but they never actually thought about the one they were in church to honor. What a shame, because the hymns & sermon were powerful reminders of the greatness of God—to everyone whose heart & mind was attentive.

That same Sunday afternoon, Byron & John rode their bikes over to the cinema at the mall to catch a new sci-fi flick. For two hours they were mesmerized, & they emerged into the bright sunlight enthusiastically buzzing about what they had just witnessed on the screen. Bored with God in the morning . . . enthralled with Hollywood in the afternoon. That's how Byron & John spent last Sunday. Why do we take worship so lightly? How can we be so moved by the things of this world & so unimpressed by the majesty of our God? Read Malachi 1:6-14 to find out what God thinks about our worthless worship & half-hearted devotion.

WHY

God gave this message through Malachi to confront the people with their sins and to challenge them to restore their relationship with God.

ILLUSTRATION

Rachel goes to church every Sunday, but only because her parents make her. She'd rather stay home, sleep in, and watch TV. Rachel is like a lot of people - they go to church but it means nothing to them. They just go through the motions.

God's people, the Jews, were like that too. Although God had brought them back into their land after many years in captivity and had helped them to rebuild their city walls and the Temple, they had slipped back into their old ways of sinning and ignoring God. They were worshiping, but they were just going through the motions - their worship meant nothing to them. So God warned them, through Malachi, that he would punish them again unless they made a great change in the way they were living and worshiping.

As you read this book, think about how you are living and worshiping. And decide to get serious about your relationship with God.

Question

“In what way have You loved us?” (1:2)

“In what way have we despised Your name?” (1:6); “In what way have we defiled You?” (1:7)

“In what way shall we return?” (3:7)

“In what way have we robbed You?” (3:8)

“What have we spoken against You?” (3:13)

Significance

This question reveals an alarming lack of trust in God. The Israelites were implying that God had been unfaithful to His covenant. “If You really love us, why are we still under foreign oppressors, waiting for the promised kingdom?”

This question shows the half-heartedness & the rationalizations of the nation’s religious leaders. They were saying, in effect: “We’ve been making the required sacrifices. What more do you want?” But as Malachi pointed out, the sacrifices offered to God were unfit animals (1:8–10).

This question reveals an appalling blindness to sin & an arrogant attempt to floss over wrongdoing. “We don’t know what You want us to do, because we don’t see what we have done wrong.” This question underscores the people’s greed. They did not view their possessions as God’s possessions to be used for His glory.

This question displays the Israelites’ callousness. They had said it was “useless to serve God” (3:14). But they continued to think that their external observance of religious ceremonies would satisfy God’s demands on their lives.

Application

Do we demand proof of God’s love for us?

Do we offer God our best in worship, or do we just go through the motions?

When faced with our sin, do we make excuses?

Do we gladly give to God?

Do we wholeheartedly serve God?