

4. Faithless or Faithful?

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Preacher: Edward Lobb

[0 : 00] Well friends, let's turn to the prophet Malachi again, page 801. Now in this book of Malachi, the prophet is expressing his indignation against the people of Israel, against his contemporaries in Jerusalem.

The date here is about 450 BC. But the prophet's indignation against the people is in truth the Lord God's indignation against his people.

It's the Lord who is angry with his people and he voices his anger through his servant Malachi. But ultimately, the prophet's message is a message of mercy. And this is true of all the Old Testament prophets because if the people can be shown their sin and if they can be persuaded that they are indeed guilty and sinning they may repent and return to the Lord and find blessing and mercy from him.

That's the way in which the Old Testament prophets are geared. And the Old Testament prophets of course will expose our own hearts as well. That's why we need to hear them. That's why we need to hear sermons on them as well.

I know that the external trappings of our life have changed greatly between 450 BC and today. But the human heart is very much the same as it was then.

[1 : 25] And that's why we need to hear these prophets today. Now over the last three weeks we've seen Malachi criticizing the Lord's people in three ways. First in chapter 1 verses 1 to 5 the prophet shows them that they have forgotten the covenant love of the Lord.

I have loved you says the Lord but they reply how have you loved us. Secondly in chapter 1 verses 6 to 14 the prophet takes them to task for bringing sickly and weak animals calves and goats to the temple to be sacrificed.

And then thirdly in chapter 2 verses 1 to 9 he singles out the Jewish priests who should have been giving fine spiritual leadership to the people but the priests are failing dismally to give the people good instruction in the law of Moses.

So they're failing not only in their duties as sacrificing priests accepting these sickly animals but they're failing to instruct the people from the word of God. Now in this week's passage chapter 2 verses 10 to 16 Malachi returns to the subject of the covenant and he specifies two particular sins in which the people of Israel are breaking the covenant.

The first is that some of the Jewish men in Jerusalem are marrying pagan women. That's what verses 10 to 12 are all about. And the second thing is that some of these Jewish men are divorcing their Jewish wives and that's what verses 13 to 16 are all about.

[2 : 56] Now it may be that these two problems are linked. It may be that the men were divorcing their wives their Jewish wives in order to marry again. Now it wasn't illegal for a Jewish man to have more than one wife at this period but it's possible that some of the Jewish men who were marrying pagan women were divorcing their first wives their Jewish wives because the pagan fathers of their new brides were insisting that their daughters were going to be the number one wife.

If you're going to have my daughter's hand in marriage and the substantial dowry that goes along with her I insist that you send your Jewish wife away.

If you don't divorce her you can't have my daughter as your new wife or the wealth that goes with her. My daughter is to be your number one wife or she will not be your wife at all. It could have been that kind of pressure.

So those are the two presenting sins. Jewish men marrying pagan women and Jewish men divorcing their first wives. Now before we look at these two problems which we might call the presenting symptoms of the disease let's think for a moment of the underlying disease itself.

The underlying disease is that the people had forgotten the wonderful covenant that God had made with them. If they had treasured God's covenant with them they would never have started divorcing their wives or marrying pagan women.

[4 : 23] So let me say a little bit about the covenant which I hope will be helpful. God's covenant with his own people provides the underlying structure of the way in which he relates to his people.

The people that he is preparing finally to bring to heaven. This means that if you're a Christian God has bound himself to you by covenant. Now this covenant is more than a promise.

It's more than an agreement. It's more than a contract. It's a bond. It's a binding sovereignly administered. In the covenant God binds himself to his people to the point of death and indeed beyond.

That's why Jesus at the Last Supper after he passed the bread around then took the cup and he shared the wine with his friends and he said this cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood.

The old covenant was also sealed with blood the blood of goats and calves but the ultimate the final covenant the new covenant inaugurated by Jesus is guaranteed by a more precious blood the blood of God's son.

[5 : 33] And the extent of God's commitment to his people is demonstrated by his willingness to send his beloved son to die a cruel death so that we should not have to be eternally rejected.

Now let me come at this from a slightly different angle. When we talk to the typical non-Christian if there is such a person about the gospel and Christianity the issue typically is the question of God's existence.

So if you were to stand up on Socky Hall Street on a busy shopping day with a placard or maybe a sandwich board which said I'm here to talk to any passerby about God's gospel most people would pass you by wouldn't they?

They'd leave you leave a good 10 metres but the ones who did stop to speak to you I guess on the whole would ask you to demonstrate God's existence. Show me that God exists and then I'll believe in him.

Now that issue the issue of God's existence is not an issue in the Bible. The Bible from Genesis chapter 1 verse 1 onwards assumes the existence of God and the Bible treats the question does God exist as a no-brainer.

[6 : 42] The Bible says curtly the fool says in his heart there is no God. So to disbelieve in God's existence is in the Bible's eyes simply foolish.

The issue in the Bible is not does a man believe that God exists but rather is a man willing to submit to the God that we all know exists. You see in the Bible God is not some intellectual puzzle to be solved but a mighty king to be obeyed.

The Bible treats non-Christian man not as an innocent enquirer but as a stubborn rebel. Now when a man or woman finally capitulates that's what it is to become a Christian it is to capitulate isn't it? When we finally capitulate and submit to Christ as king we find ourselves obliged to serve our new master. We discover that we are bound to our new master by a bond and then we discover to our delight not only that we are bound by this bond to him but our new master has also willingly bound himself to us.

So in the covenant bond God says to his people I am your God and you are my people. I am bound to you just as you are bound to me. It's a two-way binding.

[7 : 59] So that's the wonderful arrangement that describes the way in which God relates to his people. and the gospel is the highest and greatest expression of the covenant.

It shows the full extent of God's loving commitment his binding of himself to his people. It shows the length to which God was prepared to go in order to rescue his people and win them for everlasting life.

So the gospel describes how Jesus though fully God was prepared to forsake all his divine privileges as the old Christmas hymn puts it he came down to earth from heaven who is God and Lord of all and it was a long way down.

As Paul puts it in Philippians chapter 2 he humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death even death on a cross. Now that is the covenant expressed to the nth degree.

That is how much God has loved his people. So to come back now to Malachi chapter 2 the people of the covenant God's people are under orders in the Bible to grow more and more like God.

[9 : 12] That is what it is to grow as a Christian to become more like him. So in the heart of the Old Testament the Lord says be holy as I am holy. Follow my holiness be holy like me.

So to grow as a believer is to become more like him. So if God is covenantal to the core of his being if he is prepared to bind himself to his unworthy people right to the point of shedding his blood in death then he teaches us and expects us to be like him.

To grow as a Christian is to be conformed to the image of Jesus to become more and more like Jesus. And one of the greatest characteristics of the Lord Jesus is his willingness to commit himself to his bride his people to the point of death.

So as a Christian man or Christian woman grows in the Christian faith one of the things that happens deep inside us is that we become filled with what you might call the spirit or atmosphere of the covenant.

We become covenantally oriented people. We know how utterly God binds himself to us and therefore we as we imitate him learn to be people who bind ourselves to our proper commitments.

[10 : 30] So we become increasingly loyal to our colleagues true to our word faithful to our promises and above all if we are married people we become unswervingly faithful to our spouses.

If the heavenly bridegroom is faithful to his bride to the point of death we too learn to become faithful to our spouses to the point of death till death us do part.

Now let's allow Malachi the prophet to be our teacher here. I'd like to point out first the shape of verses 10 to 16 as a little chunk within the book as a whole.

The first verse and a half there verse 10 and the first half of verse 11 are introducing this little section of the prophecy and they're making the point that the people of Judah are being faithless. We then have their two sins of unfaithfulness described. The first is there in the second half of verse 11 and in verse 12 Judah is faithless because her menfolk are marrying foreign women and then verse 13 describes you'll see a second thing and this second thing you do and this second thing that they're doing is that they are practicing lavish exhibitionist weepings and groanings at the Lord's altar.

[11 : 51] In fact they're so good at tears they could weep for the national weeping team but God is not answering their prayers their groanings and cryings. Why? Because they are divorcing their wives.

So they look very religious they come trooping into the Lord's temple with their handkerchiefs at the ready to do their weeping and groaning but they're sending away their wives the wives that they have been married to since they were young and that combination of religious practice and moral disobedience is something that God has always hated.

So let's look at the first verse and a half verse 10 the prophet begins you'll see with two questions and these two questions both demand the same answer.

Have we not all one father? Well there's only one answer to that the people all know it yes of course. Second question has not one God created us?

Answer yes of course. Now Malachi in saying that is pointing out two of the fundamentals of Old Testament belief. This is elementary stuff you might say it's a little bit like going into school and asking the little children in primary two do two and two make four?

[13 : 09] Yes miss. Do five and five make ten? Yes miss. undeniable fundamentals basic building blocks of true knowledge.

Now the first of Malachi's questions here concerns God as the father of the Jewish race and the second question concerns God as the maker of the world but the sharp point of these questions lies in the word one.

Malachi is saying in effect to his contemporaries you've lost your bearings my brothers you've forgotten your origins it's the one and only God who fathered our race the Jewish race and it's the one and only God who created everything.

If then we have only one God and one father and creator we are ourselves deeply united to him and to each other. If we were Hindus if we believed in a multiplicity of gods or if we were pantheists and believed that the divine essence had somehow crept all over the planet and popped up in every bush and blade of grass well of course we'd feel that our links with each other were pretty slender and tenuous but we have one originator one father one creator which means that we are bound to him and to each other and therefore faithfulness to him is required and to each other the unity the oneness of our origin determines the unity of our relationships with each other and requires that we

be loyal both to God and to each other so in verse 10 the forcefulness of the third question depends upon the answer to the first two questions have we not all one father?

yes has not one God created us? yes well then if we admit that if we admit that we're united in our creation and our calling to be God's special people what on earth are we doing being faithless to one another and trampling the covenant of our fathers underfoot and then Malachi specifies the first sin the first thing verse 11 how has Judah which means the people of God been faithless and committed abomination in Israel and in Jerusalem by marrying the daughter of a foreign god which involves says Malachi profaning the sanctuary of the Lord which he loves now that phrase the daughter of a foreign god is an interesting expression Malachi might simply have called her a pagan woman because that's what he's talking about but he puts it like this to show where her heart really lies you see this these women that the men were marrying they were not pagan women who had become

[15 : 57] Jews so this woman that he's talking about here is not like Ruth Ruth you remember was a Moabitess but she became part of Israel she began to trust Israel's God and identified herself with Israel's people no this is a different kettle of fish this woman although entering into marriage with a Jewish man has not renounced her allegiance to her pagan idols she hasn't become a daughter of Israel she's still the daughter of a foreign god she's like the women that Solomon married in large numbers they remained pagans and so they stole his heart away from its early allegiance to the Lord and thus Solomon allowed these women to ruin him and Malachi has more to say about this in the second half of verse 11 to marry these women who remained pagans was he says to profane the sanctuary of the Lord which he loves now this phrase the sanctuary of the Lord we might immediately start thinking of the temple there but it probably doesn't refer to the temple here it probably refers to the people themselves the people of God are his sanctuary his holy dwelling place you know how in New Testament terms

Christ's people become the temple of the Holy Spirit the very residence of the Spirit of God within us so how can the people of Judah invite a foreign God an idol to share house room with the God of Israel such a thing says Malachi is abominable to God it's a sacrilege the true God cannot share the corner of a house with an idol a pretend God God loves his sanctuary but because he is who he is he must be its sole possessor now to think of how this applies to us this is the reason why Christians must marry Christians so that no foreign God is admitted into the sanctuary if you are a Christian but you marry somebody who is not a Christian you will end up with your allegiance to the Lord hold below the water line and sooner or later you will go down now you may be you may be a person who is tempted by this very thing perhaps you are a young adult and you would love to be married well that's normal and natural isn't it but you haven't yet found a Christian who is a possible marriage partner and you perhaps think to yourself

I am such and such an age I just cannot see myself going through life without marrying I have got to find somebody and then you meet somebody who is not a Christian but who is very attractive and fun to be with and inch by inch you are drawn towards this person I wonder if I could share a snippet of my own personal history which I hope might be helpful when I was 18 or 19 a university student I was a young Christian and I was making very slow and painful and hesitant progress as a Christian learning to follow the Lord and at that time in my life I had a girlfriend who was not a Christian now she was a lovely girl and she had delightful parents that made it harder for me I think because the parents were so welcoming and friendly to me and encouraged me in my friendship with their daughter but I knew and my older Christian friends knew as well those who helped me and shepherded me and they told me so I knew that I could not be a real follower of Christ and also end up marrying this girl

I knew that if Christ was to be my king and I was to be his servant I would have to break this friendship off and eventually after months months of agonising over it I did break it off on my 20th birthday it was the most desolate birthday I've ever had in my life but now that I look back on that from many years later I can see that it was the most important moral decision that I have ever taken it was formative to be given the strength by the Lord to make that kind of decision sets a precedent in a person's life I would not be a preacher of the gospel today if I had not made that decision on my 20th birthday I know it now this is what Malachi is teaching us here to marry the daughter of a foreign god is to profane the sanctuary of the Lord which he loves I'm so thankful now that the Lord kept me from making what would have been a ruinous decision it is far better for a Christian to go to the grave having never married than to marry somebody who's not a Christian and if you're a

Christian who has never married perhaps you're getting on in years now and the possibility of marriage seems to have faded because you've never met the right person don't forget that all of us who are Christians will be married in the new creation not to each other not to another human being but to the Lord himself nobody will be left on the shelf in heaven so there's the Lord's first quarrel with his people in Jerusalem they're marrying outside the covenant and verse 12 tells us how the Lord will respond to this kind of behaviour may the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob says the prophet any descendant of the man who does this and that may simply mean any and every person who behaves in this way cut off from the tents of Jacob means cast adrift from membership of the people of God driven off the campsite it's a sobering verse well let's turn to the second thing as Malachi describes it in verse 13 let me read verses 13 and 14 again and this second thing you do you cover the Lord's altar with tears with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favour from your hand but you say why does he not because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth to whom you have been faithless though she is your companion and your wife by covenant well clearly significant numbers of Jewish men were divorcing their wives because they were losing sight of God's covenant with them they lost sight of the nature of the covenant of marriage which they had entered into with their wives and there's a real measure of religious hypocrisy going on here verse 13 shows that they were still bringing their offerings to the temple they still seem to be praying at least after a fashion why are they weeping and groaning and throwing themselves around at the temple well presumably because having brought their sacrifices to God they were expecting him to be answering their prayers favourably but he wasn't

Lord we've been bringing our sacrifices we've been following the law of Moses but you're not blessing our crops or our families our sheep are dying there isn't enough rain our children are poorly what are you doing?

[23 : 17] so what they're doing is attending to a more superficial aspect of the law of Moses while disobeying something that is fundamental to God's creation purposes namely faithfulness in marriage it's a bit like being taken to court charged with murder and you plead in your defence that you weren't breaking the speed limit well maybe you weren't but you were doing something much worse so these Jewish men they may have been keeping a certain part of God's law after a fashion but they were ignoring a much more fundamental aspect of it so friends we must see now what God says to us through Malachi about divorce and why divorce is so wrong in God's sight but let me say this first divorce sometimes comes to a person unwanted and unbidden I imagine that in a group as large as this tonight there will be a number of folk here who have been divorced and never wished to be and never had any intention of ending up divorced and yet it happened we have to acknowledge that sometimes it's the inevitable end of a marriage so for example if a wife is being regularly beaten up physically abused made black and blue by her husband it may be that that marriage has to come to an end there's no option or if one spouse in a marriage is committing adultery repeatedly and unrepentantly it may be quite impossible for that marriage to continue now if you've been divorced for a reason like that the lash of Malachi's tongue is not directed at you you've been the innocent sufferer

Malachi is not talking about someone like you and even if you're a person who has wrongly caused a divorce you've divorced because of your own past wrong behaviour if you come to Christ in repentance then forgiveness is fully and freely lavishly yours the cross of Christ is big enough to cover any and every sin many repentant murderers have come to Christ and have been forgiven and wonderfully transformed divorce is not an unforgivable sin but all of us whatever our marital status need to hear why God is so set against divorce because it will strengthen our understanding not only of marriage but of what it means to belong to the Lord's covenant what it means to be a Christian so let's see I think there are three reasons here that Malachi unfolds for us three reasons why divorce is wrong first because marriage is a covenant which the Lord himself has witnessed have a look at verse 14 because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth to whom you have been faithless though she is your companion and your wife by covenant now that verse really is not quite describing a wedding ceremony but it's taking us back to a wedding ceremony the bride and the groom are young the wife of your youth apparently it was rare in Old Testament Israel for any man to reach the age of 20 without being married people got married very young 17, 18, 19 that was the normal thing and who was present at the wedding well the bride the groom the parents friends bridesmaids ushers best man and witnesses now still today as I'm sure

you know a wedding document the legal document has to be signed by two witnesses and the reason why they signed the document is to certify that they have witnessed the promises the covenant promises that the bride and groom have given to each other so the groom says to the bride this will vary a bit from one church or one ritual to another but the groom says to the bride I will always be yours till death us do part and the bride says and I will always be yours till death us do part and the witnesses who need to be over 18 and thus competent adults sign their names to make the point that the ceremony and the document that records it are public acts the young couple are not just entering into some private agreement they're being joined together in a public way that has legal entailments marriage is one of the building blocks of human society and the presence of the witnesses shores up and undergirds the act of marriage but says

Malachi God himself also stands as witness he saw and noted and has not forgotten the promise that you made to that young girl all those years ago if you turn your back on her you thumb your nose at him secondly from verse 15 God himself is the one who joins a man and woman in marriage for the purpose of perpetuating the covenant for future generations so verse 15 did he did God not make them that's the bride and groom one with a portion of the spirit in their union and what was the one God seeking godly offspring so it's God who joins a man and woman together now it doesn't always seem like that to us does it because on the human level if you're married think of how your courting actually took place on the human level we begin friendship perhaps you meet at a friend's house or in the fish and chip shop or release the word on a

Thursday evening that's not why it's there by the way but it could be a happy spin off for some folk on the human level the friendship grows in a very down to earth kind of way but when the man and woman marry the truth is that God makes them one God unites them Jesus said what God has joined together let not man separate he regards marriage as a conjunction brought about by God himself so if you are a married Christian your wife is a gift of God to you don't ever forget it it's not just some human arrangement it is a heavenly blessing and as verse 15 puts it God brings a Christian man and woman together so as to fulfill his Genesis chapter one mandate to multiply and fill the earth with godly offspring others who will themselves be bearers of the gospel for the next generation now this verse 15 is not a guarantee that all the children of Christian marriages will be [30:07] Christians themselves we know that that's not the case but it's simply making the point that God's covenant purposes are transgenerational he brings believing people together in marriage so that the Bible's promises will be enjoyed and passed on into future generations by believing people and then thirdly divorce is wrong because verse 16 God hates divorce let me read to you verse 16 in the New Living translation of the Bible which I think brings out the force of it more clearly I hate divorce says the Lord the God of Israel it is as cruel as putting on a victim's blood-stained coat now the Hebrew of that verse is apparently difficult and there are various possible translations but what is clear from the verse is that God hates divorce and that divorce has something of the nature of violence and violation about it because divorce breaks a solemn covenant it is anti-God because God is at heart covenant shaped if I can put it like that

God's nature is to be unswervingly faithful to his people and therefore he wants us to be covenantally unswerving people ourselves for God to divorce his bride his people would be simply to undo his plan of salvation such a thing is impossible and he expects us to learn our behaviour from his example a few years ago I heard the true story of a Christian couple I think they were about 30 they were quite young and they'd been married for some years but their marriage was going through a time of great difficulty so difficult that they had more or less decided to divorce each other and a Christian friend heard about this was very upset and went to see them he thought I must go and try to persuade them not to take this awful step so he went round spent an hour or two with them in their house trying to talk the whole thing through and after that hour or two had gone he'd made no apparent progress at all the time came when he had to leave so he was walking down the corridor to the front door and this verse

Malachi 2.16 came into his mind he turned to that couple and just before he walked out of the door he said do you know Malachi Malachi says that God hates divorce and off he went now that young couple they looked at each other afterwards and they said what are we doing what are we doing if God hates divorce how can we possibly think of taking this step that verse went home and they rebuilt their marriage on the strength of it so Malachi the prophet after giving us these powerful reasons why divorce is so hateful to the Lord did you notice he gives us just one command in the passage it's there in verse 15 so guard yourselves in your spirit and let none of you be faithless to

the wife of your youth and in fact that is so important he repeats it in the very next verse so guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless guard yourselves we need brothers and sisters to be vigilant we are more sinful than we often appreciate and when you think of the pressure of society and the world that we live in our society today does not look at marriage and divorce through the eyes of the bible in the world's eyes marriage is something that may work or it may not work if it works then bravo that's fine if it doesn't then it can quickly be set aside and a second or even third marriage can be entered into and as we know there have been lots of famous people who've been married three or four times and they still seem to come up smiling at least in front of the cameras but that's not God's way

Malachi says we must guard ourselves in our spirits guard yourself in spirit that's that deep inside part of ourselves that other people don't see the deep inside place where adultery begins and where monogamy becomes undermined that's where we need to guard ourselves and our marriages and if our marriages begin to lose their sweetness and joy if something begins to go wrong let's attend to the problem the time to repair a building is when the first cracks appear not when the building has become a ruin and if we guard ourselves we shall not end up as faithless people that's the dreadful word used in verse 15 and verse 16 on the contrary we shall know what it is to become more deeply faithful we shall become more truly covenantal men and women with the values of the covenant of God deeply branded upon our hearts our God who is faithful to us to the point of death in the world's eyes marriage has become a lightweight thing but in the Bible's eyes it is always a heavy weight it is central to the way in which God has structured the world it's at the heart of the account of creation in Genesis 1 and 2 it is very precious the breakdown of marriage in society signals the breakdown of society itself so says the prophet guard yourselves in your spirit and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth let us pray dear God our father we tremble as we think of the words of your prophet because we know the weakness and frailty of our own hearts and so together as a body of believing people we look to you and ask you to help us by your grace to be obedient to the teaching here we pray for our marriages that they will become sweeter and deeper and stronger and more and more filled with joy as time goes on for those here who are preparing to be married or may be married in a year or two we ask that you will prepare them too to be covenantally faithful and we pray that this great wonderful institution of marriage your idea your provision may once again be upheld and honoured in our society as the gospel itself is proclaimed and believed we ask it in Jesus name

[37 : 11] Amen