

Faithfulness in Marriage

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[0 : 01] We turn now to God's Word and to the book of Malachi. It's the last book of the Old Testament and you'll find that on page 801 in the Church Visitor Bible.

And we're looking at Malachi chapter 2 and verses 10 to 16. If you've not been with us the last couple of Sunday evenings, we've been working through Malachi.

And there's a book which contains a series of disputes between the Lord and his people. And his people have become quite disheartened, disillusioned as they look at their situation.

And they doubt God's goodness, his care for them, his love for them. And so look at verse 1 or verse 2 even of the first chapter. And the Lord says, I have loved you.

But the people doubt. They say, how? And again and again through the book, the Lord exposes the people's ignorance, their self-deception in various areas.

[1 : 07] And last week we were looking at the priests in particular in the way they're treating the sacrifices and their instruction. And tonight the focus shifts to the people and to some of their relationships, as we'll see.

So chapter 2, verse 10. Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?

Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign God.

May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts. And the 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 favor from your hand.

But you say, why? 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 wife by covenant.

[2 : 28] Did he not make them one with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

For the man who does not love his wife, but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.

Amen. This is the word of the Lord. May he bless it to us this evening. Amen. Life is full of ups and downs, isn't it?

We go through the Christian life, and there are times when things are great. The sailing is plain.

There are times when things are tough.

And sometimes that's just life. We experience great joys and crushing sorrows, inexpressible delight, and indescribable pain.

[3 : 41] And perhaps at those times, it seems as if to us that God is absent. He doesn't seem to be at work in our lives, in our church, or answering our prayers.

And often that is just our perception of things. It looks to us, we who are limited and finite, it seems to us as if God is absent. When, of course, we know that he isn't.

But there will be times for some of us when that sense of absence is, in fact, the Lord's discipline in our lives. We are experiencing the consequences of our faithlessness in a particular area of our lives.

And sometimes we need to see the reality of our unfaithfulness. And here in Malachi, the people are utterly blind to their astonishing faithlessness.

They think it's God who is being faithless. Look at verse 13. Because he no longer accepts their offerings. What is going on, they think?

[4 : 45] Well, Malachi exposes the reality. Why is God not accepting their offerings? Well, it's because of their faithlessness toward one another.

And particularly in their marriages. Which in reality is ultimately faithlessness toward him. To sit light to their marriages was to profane the covenant of their fathers.

In fact, their faithlessness in marriage, and in particular their marriages to foreign wives, threatened the very heart of the plans and purposes of God for his world.

Remember back in Genesis chapter 3. What was the great hope of salvation then? Well, it was a serpent crusher. The seed of the woman. And from then on, it was the great hope of God's people that they, as they multiplied, as they became the great nation promised to Abraham, as they waited for David's greatest son, the one who had reigned forever, it was their hope that one day there would be the seed of the woman.

A serpent crusher. But the actions of the people here threatened that very thing. What was it that God wanted? What was it that he was seeking?

[6 : 05] Verse 15. Godly offspring. Not just that he wanted a multi-generational community devoted to him and him alone, but also that one offspring in particular would come.

The great promised serpent crusher. That is why the people's actions here are so serious, so deserving of the sharp rebuke that Malachi gives. You see, marital unfaithfulness was not just some horizontal problem.

Not at all. Marriage is far, far bigger than that in God's purposes. It was a violation of his covenant with his people and with his plans for the world. And so too for us today.

Marriage is not just some personal contract between two individuals. It is far, far bigger than that in God's purposes. Marriage is a covenant between a man and a woman, yes, but also between those individuals and the Lord.

Christian marriages are to serve the Lord and his people. And part of the way in which marriages serve God's wider purposes is that they are faithful marriages.

[7 : 21] Marriages that produce godly offspring. And so Malachi's call to the people then to guard themselves in their marriages, to remain faithful.

Well, that stands for God's people today. So again, this is a challenging passage like last week. It is a call to faithfulness from the faithful Lord.

It is a call to return to him where his people have strayed. But it is a gracious warning. It is a warning with the purpose of bringing restoration of relationship.

Yes, between one another, but fundamentally with the Lord. So we'll look at these verses under three headings this evening. We see first the evidence of faithlessness.

And secondly, the consequences of faithlessness. And then thirdly, the remedy for faithlessness. So firstly, the evidence. The evidence of faithlessness.

[8 : 24] Faithlessness is evidenced in disobedient marriages to those outside the people of God and in divorces within the people of God. The faithlessness of the people toward the Lord in their breaking of the covenant bond of faithfulness with him leads to all sorts of problems in our world, doesn't it?

Not least in the most intimate of human relationships, that of marriage. You see, vertical faithlessness, faithlessness with God leads inevitably to horizontal faithlessness.

And faithlessness amongst the people is the evidence of the more fundamental breach of faithfulness. That breach between man and the Lord.

And so Malachi here sets forth the evidence of the faithlessness of the people and particularly in their marriages. Now before we delve in, it almost doesn't need to be said, but we are wading into deeply complex issues here.

Issues that are perhaps deeply personal and painful for some folk here this evening. And as we look at these verses together, we're not at all attempting to say everything there is to say about marriage and divorce.

[9 : 46] Some issues and situations are best discussed in private. And so if I don't answer the particular issue you're wanting to think about or that you're facing, then do come and talk afterwards.

But remember too, that Malachi was not attempting to write a comprehensive account of marriage either. He was addressing particular concerns and issues at a particular time and in a particular place.

He's raising issues about marriage here because they are serious in themselves, but more fundamentally, he's raising them to expose their faithlessness toward God.

So our task tonight is to listen carefully to what he was saying to God's people then and why and then think about the implications for God's people today.

So let's look at the two issues that the Lord through Malachi addresses in terms of their marriages. Firstly, their marriages with women from outside the covenant community, from outside the faith.

[10:53] That's the first evidence of their faithlessness. And it's that they profaned the covenant of their fathers, verse 10. The language is stark, isn't it?

And faithless. An abomination has been committed. They have profaned the sanctuary. And that's probably a reference to the people of God themselves. And the sanctions are equally stark.

Whoever does this will have his descendants cut off from the people of God. What's the issue?

Well, it's there in verse 11.

They have married the daughters of foreign gods. The problem is not so much that they are foreigners, but that they serve foreign gods.

Such marriages violated the covenant made between God and Israel at Mount Sinai. And this was a covenant that stipulated, expressly ruled out, intermarrying with other nations.

[11:54] And the reason given in Deuteronomy chapter 7 is that to do so will turn away their sons from following the Lord. They will serve other gods instead.

And so that proved to be so. In Nehemiah chapter 13, written around the same time as Malachi, we read of exactly this sort of thing happening.

Nehemiah writes, In those days, in those days, also I saw the Jews who had married the women of Ashdod, Ammon and Moab. And half of their children spoke the language of Ashdod.

And they could not speak the language of Judah, but only the language of each peoples. And later on, Nehemiah calls this a great evil, a treacherous act.

And the great danger of such marriages, the reason the Lord prohibited them, was that they would lead the next generation and the ones that followed away from the Lord to the worship of other gods.

[12:59] That was the danger. And that was the reality down the line. You can almost imagine, can't you, the discussion in one of the returned exiles' homes.

There's young Tobiah of the house of Adam, recently married to one of the women of Ammon. And as one of the returned exiles, perhaps, there weren't too many options amongst his own people.

And so he marries this young woman from Ammon. And Tobiah, keen to head out to the temple, senses a slight reticence from his wife.

Do we have to go to the temple again up in Jerusalem? Can't we just bring the children to the nearest Ammonite temple? It's nearer. And the creche is much better. And so young Tobiah agrees.

And before he realizes it, they rarely go to the temple at all. The children know almost nothing about the Lord, the God of Israel. You can see how such marriages would be so devastating to God's people then.

[14:07] But the warnings apply today. Confining marriage to Christians, to the community of faith, is so important, not only because marrying a non-believer will inevitably lead to split allegiances down the line, but also because the Christian family is the primary way in which God has provided for the nurture of the next generation of believers.

That is the primary way God does that. Now we do need to be careful here as we apply and think this through for us today. Life is not neat.

Things are never black and white. I can't possibly hope to run through every conceivable scenario. And there will be folk here tonight for whom this is a live issue, either for yourself or someone you know.

So is it simply the case that Christians are never to marry non-Christians? Is that what this is saying? What I think it is saying is that it must be wrong for a Christian to marry a non-Christian who is, to put it in the language of Malachi, the daughter of a foreign God.

To marry someone who is a committed Muslim or a committed Hindu or a committed atheist must be wrong. That will be surely catastrophic when it comes to raising children.

[15 : 33] And if you are contemplating going down that route, don't. If that situation faces you down the line, don't. But to marry someone who is agnostic, who perhaps doesn't object to the children being raised and being taught Christian truth and being brought up amongst God's people, that seems to us a slightly different category, doesn't it?

But is it really? I guess in some ways it was a little easier in Malachi's day to discern who was worshipping what God. It was a far more explicitly religious society then. You could see what God's people bowed down to. And so it seems to us today that there are people who worship the true God and there are people who we see worshipping false gods whether that's Muslims, Hindus, Sikhs, whatever it might be.

But for so many in our society they don't seem to worship any God. But the Bible shows us the reality, doesn't it? You either serve the living God or you don't.

There is no middle way. And so it is worth pondering the question when it comes to it. Will a non-Christian spouse really be happy to allow that to happen, to have you raise your children in a Christian way?

[16 : 58] If you are contemplating going down that route, don't. Don't. That was Malachi's message then. And the New Testament is at one with Malachi.

Christians are to marry fellow believers in Christ. That was the Apostle Paul's encouragement to a wife who is considering remarriage after the death of her husband.

He says in 1 Corinthians 7 that she is free to marry anyone she wishes only in the Lord. But perhaps the situation Malachi describes here is the situation you already find yourself in.

You married a non-Christian and you're still married to them. Perhaps you became a Christian after marrying them. Perhaps now you have children. Do you just walk away?

Well, no. We have to deal with reality, don't we? You are to remain faithful to your promises to your husband or to your wife. And you are to seek to honor the Lord in whatever situation you're in.

[18 : 08] And again, the Apostle Paul encourages those in that situation to not divorce their spouse but rather to remain married in order to win them to the Lord Jesus Christ.

Well, much more could be said but the key thought is clear. Don't marry outside the community of God's people. Don't marry a non-believer.

Well, that was the first evidence of faithlessness amongst God's people then. Let's look on to the second. And the second was their divorcing of wives from within the covenant community, from within the church.

Now, the presenting problem, at least from the perspective of the people of Malachi's day, was that God was not listening to them or heeding their sacrifices. They were covering the Lord's altar with tears, weeping and groaning because he no longer regarded their sacrifices.

Verse 13. Why does he not come to cry? Why? Well, because verse 14, 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.

[19 : 35] The men were divorcing their wives from within the covenant community and possibly doing so in order to marry some of the foreign women in the first half of the passage.

Now, it's not explicit on that, but that could be a likely explanation. They're divorcing their wives to marry these foreign women who worship other gods. They had lost sight of God's faithfulness to them.

And so they'd lost sight of the faithfulness they owe to one another. That's what's going on in Malachi. They look at their circumstances. They conclude, God must not be faithful.

And so they lose sight of the faithfulness they owe to each other. And such faithlessness was not tolerated by the Lord. And so he doesn't look favorably on their sacrifices any longer.

God is clear through the scriptures that he loves marriage. What we have there in verse 14 is a beautiful description of what marriage is. It speaks about the wife of your youth, your companion, your wife by covenant.

[20 : 40] Conversely, God hates divorce. And it is prohibited in the Old Testament in general terms, but permitted in a very limited set of circumstances.

Although none of those circumstances are mentioned here. So what is going on in Malachi's day here is illegitimate divorce. There are no grounds for the divorce here. Men are walking out on their wives because they can't be bothered to make it work anymore.

Or maybe a better looking offer has come along. And on top of that, they bring wailing and groaning before the Lord. They think they can win the Lord round with these rituals borrowed from the pagans around them.

But the Lord will not have it for a moment. His view of marriage is high. Look at what we discover here about the Lord and marriage.

Verse 14, he is a witness of their marriages and as such he is going to hold them accountable to the covenant they entered into with their wives. He exposes the horror and seriousness of what they've done with these no fault divorces.

[21 : 51] He, the Lord, was party to their marriages. Verse 15, did he, that is the Lord, not make them one with a portion of the spirit in their union? The Lord is, in a real and intimate way, part of their marriage.

And so to break that bond, to break that bond of marriage, is to break covenant with the Lord himself. Marriage is not merely a human endeavor.

Not only that, but one of the key purposes of marriage within the people of God is thwarted. What was the one God seeking? Verse 15, godly offspring.

God separated Israel from the other nations in order to bring forth a godly seed, the Messiah, through whom all the nations were to be blessed. And so Malachi exhorts his people to remember their separate calling, to preserve it, by having no more to do with such alliances to foreign wives, and for the men of Israel to divorce the wives of their youth.

That was to threaten the godly seed that was the hope of the nation. Malachi exposes the people's behavior for what it really was.

[23 : 12] It wasn't merely horizontal unfaithfulness, which in itself is serious, but it was also vertical faithlessness. It is the breaking of the deep covenant bond, a covenant which God himself has been intimately involved in.

He even describes it in terms of violence, verse 16, the man who loves his wife, who divorces his wife, sorry, covers his garment with violence.

To divorce his wife was a violent act. That seems an odd thing to say, doesn't it? Especially to our ears, which so often hear about divorce in terms of liberation and freedom.

But to divorce a woman then was to leave her without provision, to leave her vulnerable, without means. It really was an act of violence that would cause real harm.

And so to today, the statistics from broken homes are shocking. for us today, in the family of God, in the church, we must do all we can to preserve marriage and marriages.

[24 : 29] Divorce is to be strenuously avoided at almost any cost. Though it is true that the Lord Jesus and his apostles do have to sadly allow for it sometimes, it is in very restricted circumstances.

And even then, it is a concession rather than a command. We see here so clearly that God is opposed to divorce.

He wants to see marriage upheld within his church. But this is a fallen world. We are fallen people.

And if you have been divorced, you need to know that it is not the unforgivable sin. No sin is so great that it cannot be cleansed and covered by the cleansing power of Christ's death on the cross.

All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, but his grace is sufficient even for you. Malachi is a call to you.

[25 : 39] If you've not yet repented of past sin to do so, it is a call to return to him and he will return to you. That is the graciousness of our God.

So we see here the evidence of faithlessness, evidenced in marriages with those outside the people of God and in divorce within the people of God.

And these visible examples of faithlessness were pointing to an even greater issue, the people's faithlessness toward the Lord. And so we see secondly, and more briefly, the consequences of faithlessness.

God will not tolerate the faithlessness of his people as demonstrated in their marriages. As we said, faithlessness in marriage is used by Malachi to expose the people's faithlessness towards one another and toward him.

This isn't merely a horizontal relational problem. There are major vertical consequences which Malachi exposes here. And we see many of these already, but let me just state them briefly, and then draw out an implication for us.

[26 : 57] So verse 10, they have profaned the covenant of their fathers. Verse 11, they have profaned the sanctuary of the Lord.

Verse 12, they will be cut off from the people. Verse 13, they will not have their offerings accepted by the Lord. Verse 15, they fail to produce the godly offspring that the Lord sought. These are major, major relational issues. Breaking covenants, being cut off from the people of God, being rejected by the Lord, failing to fulfill their purposes of God's people. Their faithlessness toward one another, seen particularly in their marriages, puts them under the curse. They will be rejected by the Lord. That's the logical flow of verses 13 and 14. The Lord no longer regards their offerings because of their faithlessness in marriage. Our worship can't be a separate compartment from our behavior in life.

[28 : 03] wake up, says Malachi to the people then. Wake up, see what you're doing. You may doubt God's love for you. We saw that in chapter 1 verses 1 to 5.

They've looked at their circumstances and they concluded that God mustn't much care for them. And they go through some of the religious ritual, not caring to give their best because, well, God doesn't seem to care for us.

They ought light to their marriages because, well, God seems to have held light to his covenant to them. But Malachi exposes the reality. He calls them to repentance.

And so for you and I today, God has demonstrated to his people his unfailing faithfulness in the most extraordinary way that he could.

the Lord Jesus Christ himself took upon himself the sins of his people, making atonement for my sin and yours. Our eternal future has been guaranteed.

[29 : 09] But as you and I look around, it sometimes doesn't look or feel much like it, does it? As we examine our circumstances, we perhaps feel that God is distant.

His faithfulness, we begin to doubt it. And that can play out in the area that Malachi addresses, that of marriage. Now perhaps you desire very much to be married.

And for you it hasn't quite happened yet. Well heed the warning of Malachi and don't be tempted to look beyond the people of God. It is a matter of faithfulness to the Lord.

Lord, if you are married and you find yourself perhaps daydreaming of another life with another partner, don't entertain such thoughts.

Before you know it, they won't just be thoughts confined to your head. It is a matter of faithfulness to the Lord. Peter, in his first letter, is clear that for a Christian, issues within marriage, even issues that fall short of the serious matters of infidelity can lead to a real impact on your relationship with the Lord.

[30 : 31] Peter says this, Husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the women as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.

how Christians treat one another, and especially how Christians treat each other in the most intimate of relationships is of the utmost importance.

Malachi is clear. Horizontal relationships, particularly those most intimate ones, they have vertical consequences. Malachi is exposing that.

And so our third point, the remedy, the remedy for faithlessness. So guard yourselves and do not be faithless. That's Malachi's appeal.

It comes twice, there in verse 15 and again in verse 16. He's exposed the reality of the people's faithlessness. He's exposed the seriousness of it in terms of the relationship with the Lord.

[31 : 38] And now he calls them to respond. God wants his people to guard themselves in their spirit and stop being faithless with their wives. What does it mean that they guard themselves in their spirit?

Well, spirit in this sense here refers to the impulses that govern a person's life, controls their behavior. And so Malachi urges them, he appeals to them, commands them to watch over their minds and hearts, to guard them, so that they wouldn't entertain ideas of faithlessness in this area of marriage relationships.

Be vigilant, he says, guard yourselves. And then he simply tells them, do not be faithless. He's refreshingly abrupt, isn't he?

Stop doing it. Don't do it. I've shown you the seriousness of what you're doing. Stop. Now, as I look around the room tonight, there are many folk in a whole range of different personal circumstances.

Some married, some widowed, some divorced, some unmarried. But can I address just for a moment some of the younger folk, perhaps those who are unmarried, who perhaps one day might be in the position where marriage is a real option.

[33 : 03] Guard yourselves in your spirit. Guard yourselves in your spirit. Get clear in your thinking what we've covered tonight. If you're a Christian, God's will for your life is that you marry a Christian.

Now, as time goes on, you may look around and think that the pickings are slim. I'll need to look elsewhere. Well, heed the warning of Malachi.

Resolve now to marry a believer. Resolve now to advise friends to do the same. resolve now to warn friends who are heading down the track of marrying a non-Christian and not just tick the box on the Christian, but someone who truly loves the Lord as you do.

Guard yourselves in your spirit. Perhaps you're married here tonight. Malachi says to you, guard yourselves in your spirit.

faithless will first begin to take root. Where is your thought life with regard to your husband or wife?

[34 : 17] What are your fundamental convictions about marriage? If you go on what you see on TV or read in the newspaper, then you'll think it's a fairly trivial matter. There are moves afoot to make divorce even easier.

It'll be like applying for a credit card online within a few clicks of the button. Your divorce is completed. Unfaithfulness is encouraged. Websites exist for those wanting to initiate an affair. But the Bible's view of marriage and divorce is far more heavy weight and serious, isn't it? Marriage is deeply precious in God's eyes.

And so you and I are to guard, both in terms of who we choose to marry, but also in remaining faithful if we are married. And so I would encourage all of us, married or not, to talk about these things, ask each other, probing questions about such matters, help one another to guard marriages. and we all have responsibility here for one another and as a church we must do all that we can, not just to protect marriages, but to promote the inherent goodness of marriage.

[35 : 38] And marriage is an institution that's been under threat for the last few decades, hasn't it? But we must together all do what we can to promote all that is good about marriage, about sex, in its right context in marriage, promote all that is good about family life and the raising of children.

And we all have a role to play in that. We all have a role in guarding marriages, helping people remain faithful. And so you and I, we're to be faithful to one another because fundamentally our God is a faithful God.

And he, the unchanging, steadfast, faithful one has bound himself to his people, to you and I in the most intimate way through the Lord Jesus Christ and by a spirit who indwells every one of his people.

And that is our only hope, isn't it, as we think about being faithful to one another and to him. We need his grace, his help, and he gives it as we call on him and trust him, and as we remember the words of promise to his people.

I have loved you. I have loved you. He is faithful and he calls us to be faithful.

[37 : 01] Let me pray. our Father, God in heaven, you are the unchanging, faithful God.

You are steadfast in covenant love. God in you have demonstrated to us again and again your faithfulness. And so help us to be a faithful people.

Help us to be faithful to you, and help us to be faithful to one another in all our relationships, but more most specifically in those most intimate of relationships in our marriages.

So help all of us to remain faithful, for we ask it in Jesus' name. Amen. Amen. Thank you.