

Faithfulness

Sermon Topic: Prophets – Malachi

St. John's Presbyterian, Mt. Roskill

Sunday 16th Sept 2018

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Readings: Psalm 111, Malachi 1:6-11, 3:8-12, 4:1-6

This morning we come to the last of the Old Testament prophets that we are going to consider in this series. Next week we will consider how John the Baptist continues in the same line. Today we consider Malachi, the very last book of the Old Testament and last of the latter prophets in the Hebrew Tanakh. Malachi means 'my messenger' and there is debate over whether this is the work of an already known prophet like Exra or the words of an unknown messenger. Either way the message of Malachi is the last prophetic word of God that is recognised came to Israel before a silence of some four hundred years. Appropriately, Malachi's primary message is about faithfulness and he gives very specific examples of what has gone wrong. At its core Malachi's message is about faithfulness.

Malachi challenges the people to consider their actions and the spiritual confession that a consideration of their actions should lead to. In other words, God points to the things that the people are doing that are not demonstrates of their faith in Him instead their activities suggest a serious disloyalty, a practical and spiritual unfaithfulness. Malachi is very much a prophet of the "walk the talk" genre. He begins with specific accusations. One of the first of these is in regard to the sacrifices that are made at the Temple. What do we bring before God in our lives? Do we give Him the best or second best? Do we pay lip service to faith or is our relationship with the Father, with Jesus at the very heart of all we do and want to be? It is a critical question. We can all make mistakes at times, we know how often King David, Peter and others in the Scriptures messed up, but where our heart is at is critical. If we let our hearts become hardened, as Pharaoh did, to God speaking into our lives, His coaching and guidance, then the ending will not be good. The people of Israel were well down this track. What did their unfaithfulness look like? Malachi gives us the first detail: their sacrifices were of lame and diseased animals. Sacrifice was not just a ritual to appease the gods as in the pagan world. Sacrifice in the Old Testament looked backwards in repentance for the things done wrong, attitudes and actions that were less than worthy of God and worthy of punishment. Sacrifice looked forward to the Messiah, the One who would come and permanently remove sin and bring the fullness of forgiveness. But the Israelite worship had become a mockery of this. Bringing anything but the best before the Lord was to bring insult to the very heart of the Temple. And this was not only being done but was accepted as normal by people and priests.

This tells us something of the insidious nature of the traps the Evil One places before us and how we are snared. Unless the lens of our spiritual glasses are kept bright and clear by constant and regular polishing in God's Word, Prayer, Teaching and Fellowship then our spiritual vision will be murky and dim. In the relative ease and comfort of the national success that followed from King David and King Solomon's reigns the nation had become spiritually complacent. Solomon had allowed the introduction of pagan gods through his wives and concubines. For all

his spiritual wisdom, this very human failing would lead, over the next few hundred years, to the division of the nation into the states of Judah and Israel and the slow but gradual spiritual and material decline of David's nation. Corruption rarely starts and breeds instantly rather it grows from small beginnings. As Jesus would later so aptly point out in Mark 8, the bad yeast, of the Pharisees in His time, was something to watch out for. Yeast is only a tiny little thing, but it spreads and grows and impacts everything it touches. How easily we too can be sucked into the vortex of sin in our daily lives if we are not aware of it. Temptations abound – from the temptation to gossip or to be drawn into group criticism of another, to overlooking wrongs you could say or do something about, to cheating, simple thefts or misappropriations, to abusing alcohol or drugs, to enjoying inappropriate media sensationalism and violence, to inappropriate relationships, sexual engagements and so on. Few people start out on these tracks deliberately, but many end up on them. So too Israel was now far, far down this track where even the Holy was profaned and polluted as a matter of course.

The issue here is simple: all sin is against God. At the heart of the nation the priests from the Temple should have been challenging the people to maintain their faithfulness to God through all of their lives. They should have accepted the sacrifices of the people with joy as people humbly acknowledged their sin repented and did what the Law required. Instead the priests were themselves corrupt. How I hate this. How often have we seen religious leaders shamed in the media. I hate it with a passion every time we see another Roman Catholic church community or significant Pentecostal Church brought up before the world because of sexual sin or the abuse of those under its care. Even now there are calls for the current Pope to be under investigation for covering up serious instances of sexual abuse. We have even had shameful things occur in the Presbyterian Church. No one is exempt and we understand that people will occasionally fail, but when it is widespread and leadership fail to act or worse, deliberately cover things up and let them continue, then it is horrendous. Such was the case in Israel. One can only imagine how God feels about such situations. Not only were individuals unfaithful, the very institution from God's Temple led the way. God was served up what even the local leaders would refuse. Just shut the doors, turn off the fires, walk away. God could stand it no more. God was not pleased, not amused ... and He probably isn't today either by the way.

The most powerful imagery in the Scriptures about the relationship between God and His people is that of marriage. Marriage is the union of a couple not just in body but in Spirit. It is the role of the husband to be a protector and spiritual head, it is the role of the wife to be a spiritual partner and helper, equals together working in God's kingdom. Unlike the pagan world today God continues to treat marriage as critically important. Marriage speaks of the faithfulness of commitment and working through the ups and downs, the trials and joys of life together. True peace and joy comes as that relationship grows in confidence and weathers the storms. Malachi calls the Israelites to repent of their adultery with that which seems attractive but has in fact corrupted. He calls for the unfaithful to stop doing violence to their partner and reconcile in repentance, love and forgiveness. In chapter 2:15-17 Malachi speaks

God's words, **"Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. "The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect." So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful."** Israel has done violence to God by her unfaithfulness. Only a true repentance and a complete turning away from the sin that so easily ensnares will redeem the situation.

But there is another practical issue that the Lord wants addressed. His people have also neglected their practical duty. Again, in chapter 3:9-10, we get a profound word: **"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."** It was required of the Jewish nation that they pay tithes. There was a system of six tithes. The first and foremost tithe was one tenth of the agricultural production and given to the Levites who served in the Temple and to sustain the poor of Jerusalem. The Levites were not only the priests but also the civil functionaries and court system. In modern terms they were both church and state together. A second tithe was taken in years 1-2 and 4-5 for purchase of food the celebrations the people had in Jerusalem. The people could buy whatever they like so long as it eaten in Jerusalem at one or more of the festivals. The tithe from years 3 and 6 was used to support widows, orphans and the disabled and was managed by the Levites for this purpose. In failing to pay their tithes not only the religious community but the whole community suffered. Interestingly, today, Jewish people do not pay tithes as the Levitical priesthood no longer functions from the Temple as the Temple has not yet been restored. To rob God then was a double-handed insult to God and to self. Even more interesting this is the one area that God's people are challenged to test God – be faithful in giving to the Lord's work and see how much blessing He pours out in return. Just an aside here. What we see in some of the tele-evangelists and the like is a travesty. Money that comes into the church is not for the personal profit of the church staff or minister. It is primarily for the support of staff salaries, the church operation and the needy in the community. Appeals related to TV evangelism strains the boundaries of how this should be understood and operated. Especially when we see the annual incomes and net worth of many of these evangelists. They too will one day answer to God for their stewardship.

Malachi then leaves us with two final significant words. The first is that the faithful remnant, those who have walked with the Lord faithfully, those who have responded to God, repented and corrected their ways, these are the Lord's great joy and treasure. At the right time they will be greatly rewarded and will be given great joy and freedom in eternity. Those who don't will, literally, burn like stubble. Not subtle.

The second and final word concerns the end times. Possibly the times we are living in now. He says, **"See, I will send the prophet Elijah to you before that great and dreadful day of the Lord comes. He will turn the hearts of the parents to**

their children, and the hearts of the children to their parents; or else I will come and strike the land with total destruction.” (Malachi 4:5-6) As Jews have done since that time and today we too look towards the Day of the Lord's coming. One of the signs of the end times is that increasingly parents, particularly, fathers, are separated from their children in the pagan world. This breakdown of the fabric of society is a tool of the devil but God's people resist it. One of the signs of God's work in this age and of Christian families is the closeness that exists with Christian families. Something to ponder.

This then is the end of the Old Testament minor prophets series. We have seen a consistent call to faithfulness throughout. The minor church prophets have called the people of God to live lives worthy of and faithful to their calling. God knows what is happening in our lives and wants us to be actively involved in His work every day. As His hands and feet in the world we are called to impact those around us and in our own families, firstly by our example and secondly by our words of faith. God loves us and uplifts us, He blesses and encourages. His desire is that we all walk with Him day by day, that we repent and get things right if and when we wander off the track, so that when He returns we will greet Him with great joy – His family waiting for the Father to return!

Amen!