

A LOOK AT A BOOK: Malachi

February 1, 2015

THE MESSAGE OF MALACHI: Does It Matter How I Worship God?

Isn't sincerity in our worship all that counts?

Sometime back, *Psychology Today* interviewed CNN Talk-show host Larry King and asked him why he was so good at his job of interviewing people. King replied, "I'm sincere. I'm really curious. I care what people think. I listen to answers and leave my ego at the door. I don't use the word 'I'."

I found it amusing that King identified his skill at interviewing as based on his lack of using the word "I," and yet used it six times in the three lines answering the question.

I don't mean to criticize King. He has been, without doubt, one of the best interviewers on television. He actually gives his guests time to answer his questions, and that alone sets him apart from many others. But it is striking that King – without any intended irony – focused on himself as not being the center.

Really, I think we are all like that. It isn't just King. All of us find our natural center in ourselves. We simply assume that what Polonius in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* said is true: "This above all: to thine own self be true, And it must follow, as the night the day, Thou canst not then be false to any man" (I.iii.78-80).

Certainly, self-knowledge is important. Sometimes we need to be brutally honest with ourselves. But in our day, we are regularly told that the self must not only be known, it must be regarded, expressed, actualized, and obeyed! Everything from our economics to our family life, from our health to our politics, must conform to the requirements of the self. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness are not endowments of a Creator; they are the inherent rights of the self. Descartes may have said, "I think, therefore I am." Yet our motto today is "I want, therefore I am."

It's no surprise, then, that sincerity has come to be regarded as chief of the virtues. King listed his own sincerity as the first reason why he was a good interviewer. Sincerity appears to be a virtue with no downside.

But is sincerity as good as we think? I assume there are people who have sincerely

killed their neighbor, sincerely hated their parents, or sincerely blasphemed God. By itself, sincerity does not make us right. I can be sincere and wrong at the same time. Sincerity is necessary, but it is not sufficient.

Our culture's overemphasis on the sincere self has also affected how we think about religion. Sincere self-expression has come to rule not only in the fields of art, psychology, child-rearing, and education, but in religion. If yesterday's buzz words were "official" and "professional," the buzz words today are "authentic" and "real." Popular religious faith today places a premium on being private, centered on the self, and ambiguous about God.

Introducing Malachi

We began this series in the Minor Prophets in Hosea in the early eighth century B.C. Now we come to the fifth century B.C. and a prophet about whom we know less than any of the others. We know who wrote it from the first verse of his book: "An oracle: The word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi" (1:1). Malachi's book is quoted by Paul, Luke, Mark, and even Jesus. Yet Malachi himself is never mentioned anywhere else in the Bible, and his name simply means "my messenger."

Malachi wrote to the Jewish people who had been restored to their land after exile in Babylon. The temple had been rebuilt, thanks to the faithful preaching of Haggai and Zechariah. Worship at the temple may have recommenced (depending on when exactly Malachi wrote), thanks to Ezra's teaching. And Jerusalem's walls may have been rebuilt, thanks to Nehemiah's effective leadership. The Jewish nation's external circumstances looked good. Still, true worship had not been restored. So God inspired Malachi to write this short book.

God raises six disputes with his people. In a single sermon, we will not be able to deal with all the topics God addresses, but we can see the basic structure:

The first dispute is in 1:2-5;
the second is 1:6-2:9;
the third is 2:10-16;
the fourth is 2:17-3:5;
the fifth is 3:6-12;
and the sixth is 3:13-4:3.

The central disputes – disputes 3 and 4 – focus on how the people of Israel were treating one another. Disputes 2 and 5 focus on how the people of Israel were

dealing with their own lives. And disputes 1 and 6 focus on how the people regarded God. This is the order we will follow in our study; and I pray that as we proceed, you will discover that it matters very much how you worship God.

Worship of God involves how we treat other people

First, we learn in the very middle of Malachi's book that worship of God involves how we treat others.

Many people regard religion as a deeply private matter, something that involves how they think or feel about basic spiritual matters. Furthermore, religion is whatever gives them peace, composure, or a quiet sense of joy. Yet these conceptions could not be further from the picture that Malachi presents of the true religion that is acceptable to God.

Focusing and keeping our families

To begin with, God told the people of Israel that true worship of him involved how they treated their families:

Malachi 2:10-16

They had broken their covenant with God by breaking their covenants of marriage, and they were doing so in two ways: first, they were marrying those who did not worship the Lord: "Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god" (2:11b). In this verse, "sanctuary" refers to the people of Israel as a whole.

Throughout Old Testament times, God forbade the Israelites from marrying foreigners, not because he wanted to keep his people racially pure but because he wanted them to be religiously pure – worshipers of one God. The Lord knew that foreign wives and husbands would lead the hearts of his people astray. Yet again and again the Israelites disobeyed the Lord by marrying foreigners, and sure enough, their hearts were led astray.

Second, the Israelites mistreated their families through wrongful divorce. The people had begun to divorce their spouses simply because they disliked them.

So God told his people that their worship of him included faithful marriages to one another. They were not simply to live self-serving lives, marrying and divorcing whomever they wished. Rather, God was their Father and Creator (2:10), and they expressed faithful submission to him, first, by marrying only other God-worshippers

and, second, by not divorcing their spouses “for hate.” In choosing their spouses, they demonstrated what God they chose. In remaining faithful to their spouses, they demonstrated faithfulness to this God.

So, Christian, observe that Malachi speaks directly to the idea of marrying an unbeliever, and he says that it is both disobedient and religiously suicidal. The New Testament says the same (e.g., 2 Corinthians 6:14). Now, if someone is already married and then he or she comes to Christ, the Christian should continue to honor that marriage. But the Bible clearly teaches us not to set our heart on someone who is not allied to God in the first place. If God is your chief love, how can you?

Also, know that Malachi’s condemnation of ending marriages for anything other than biblical reasons applies not just to ancient Israelites but to Christians today. God’s laws do not change, no matter what the state decides. In the Bible, divorce is allowed in very particular circumstances, such as adultery and, perhaps, desertion. Yet divorce is certainly never required. The book of Hosea shows the power of love to overcome even the greatest wrongs.

It is important to remember that how we enter and maintain our marriages is a matter of worship. Paul tells us that we are to offer our bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – which is our spiritual worship (Romans 12:1).

Acting justly toward our neighbors

In the next disputation, God tells us that true worship also involves how we treat out neighbors.

Malachi 2:17-3:5

God has always been concerned about justice among his people. The religion he has revealed is not merely private. It has to do with our families. It also has to do with how we treat our neighbors.

God-worshippers must not practice sorcery or adultery. They must not lie or cheat their employees out of their wages. They must not oppress the defenseless. God cares about how his people treat others. A person who is indifferent to justice should not pretend to be a God-worshiper.

Do you know what the difference *between indifference to justice and injustice* itself is? Not much. If your heart is cold to the topic of injustice, it’s cold to

something that God cares about. God's character is revealed in justice. That's true in our cities; that's true in our land; that's true around the world.

Maybe you have assumed that since you have not witnessed God judging wrong, he never will. Or maybe you have assumed he doesn't care. I assure you, neither supposition is right. God, who was never required to care, cared so deeply that he sent his only Son to take on flesh and to die on a cross for the sins of people like you and me. Sins that he never committed. Sins that deserve his just wrath against us. Sins that he, in his amazing love, took upon himself. God calls us now to repent of those sins and to turn to him so that he might grant us forgiveness and new life in him. God's action in Jesus Christ was the greatest display of love and justice that could be imagined!

As the apostle John said, "If anyone says, 'I love God,' yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen" (1 John 4:20). Our horizontal relationships with one another testify either for or against the reality of our vertical relationship with God.

Worship is not just ethereal or private. It necessarily involves how we treat both our families and our neighbors.

Worship of God involves what we do with ourselves

A second matter that the Lord teaches us through Malachi is that worship of him involves what we do with ourselves, which brings us to the second and fifth disputes.

Here, again, we might think that our own sincerity inoculates us from any criticism, but that is not the case. God cares not only about *what* we do, he cares about *how* we do it.

Giving our best

In Malachi's day, temple worship had restarted. Once again, people brought their sacrifices and their tithes to the temple. Yet all was not right. God did not simply want whatever they could spare; he wanted their best. Consider the second dispute.

Malachi 1:6-2:9

The idea that some worship is correct while other worship is incorrect may seem strange to many people today. Can we test our worship to ensure that it is real and

true worship? In the Bible, God shows a great concern for *how* he is approached. He is real – and so are his holiness and our sin. Again, it isn't enough to be sincere, because people can be sincerely wrong.

In fact, God is so adamant about how he is worshiped that, in the Old Testament, he set aside a whole tribe of people – the Levites – to teach the people of Israel how to offer correct, God-honoring, God-glorifying worship. The Levitical priests were to guard the sanctuary from unclean offerings.

In this section, therefore, the Lord directly addressed the priests (see 1:6; 2:1) – these ones whom God refers to as “the messenger of the Lord Almighty” (2:7). When the people brought blemished sacrifices (1:14), the priests should have corrected them. Instead, they became complicit: “ ‘When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?’ says the Lord” (1:13). Apparently, they thought, “Who’s going to see? Who’s going to care?” They should have considered the fact that God specifically forbade such sacrifices in the book of Leviticus (Leviticus 22:17-25).

He wanted to know whether they were willing to bring God their best. Yet God was also interested in teaching the people that a sacrifice for their sins must be perfect. Above all else, the Levitical sacrifices were meant to point to the sacrifice for sin that was still to come – Jesus Christ, the truly unblemished one, the perfect lamb of God.

The people of Jerusalem in Malachi’s day may have questioned whether God really loved them, but the Lord aggressively responded by saying that the real question was not God’s love for Israel, but Israel’s love for God. God promised that his name would be great among the nations (1:11). But his own people profaned it. They treated it cheaply. One day the nations would be obedient in ways his own people were not obedient now (1:12; cf. Genesis 12:2-3).

If you have believed that you can worship God and remain your own Lord, keeping your best to yourself, you are wrong. Truly worshiping God includes taking him as your heavenly Father and almighty master. And he deserves your best.

Giving our all

God also deserves our all. Consider the fifth disputation.

Malachi 3:6-12

God began this exchange by reminding the Israelites that he does not change (3:6), and the constancy of his gracious character was their only hope amid their widespread disobedience. So he told them, “Return to me, and I will return to you” (3:7), as he had done in Zechariah (Zechariah 1:3).

In this passage, the Lord specifically called his people to repent of their failure to tithe (Malachi 3:8-10). The problem was not just with the priests, it was with the whole nation. Here in Malachi, the Lord promised the people that if they would be obedient in this matter, he would bless them with “so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it” (3:10), or, more literally, “until there is no more need” (ESV). The entire world belonged to God, and his people were supposed to acknowledge his ownership through their giving and their trust in his continual provision. Their sacrifices and tithes, then, were what God used to teach them to worship him with their whole selves.

Worship required more than singing songs or memorizing a Psalm on the way to the temple; it required everything.

Are you tempted to give God less than your best? Are you tempted to keep back part of what you know is his? If you are from Texas, you have certainly heard about the colorful soldier and politician Sam Houston. What you may not know is that Sam Houston came to Christ – yes, to everyone amazement. After his baptism, Houston said he wanted to pay half the local minister’s salary. When someone asked him why, he responded simply, “My pocketbook was baptized, too.”

Worship of God involves how we approach God

Finally, worship of God involves how we approach God. We learn this from the beginning and the end of Malachi.

Fifty years ago, William Miller wrote that “One might say that President Eisenhower, like many Americans, is a very fervent believer in a very vague religion.” Whether or not that accurately described President Eisenhower, it certainly describes many Americans today. People today pick and choose among an eclectic mix of various religions and philosophies according to their own tastes and perceived needs. Sociologist Robert Bellah has referred to this worldview as “Sheilism,” based on “Sheila,” the name he gave a woman he interviewed who said she believed in the “religion of me.” Of course, that’s not true religion! Malachi would say to Sheila – and to us – that such vague notions of God and such

a low regard for him prevents worship. We cannot worship what we misunderstand, discount, and disregard. You may have a great emotional weekend. You may launch out on a voyage of self-discovery. You may get in touch with your inner child. But you will not get in touch with God without approaching him as he has revealed himself.

Understanding God

This is the point Malachi makes right at the beginning of his book. Part of worshiping God is understanding God.

Malachi 1:2-5

God wanted his people to know the truth about him – that he was great and sovereign, even beyond the borders of Israel. The Lord is no village god or tribal spirit. By his own choice, he made Israel his own. And by his own choice, he rejected, even hated, Israel’s next-door neighbor, Edom (descendants of Esau). Paul used this passage in his famously controversial Romans 9 to argue that God has sovereignty over all things and all people. (God’s sovereignty is not proclaimed only in the Old Testament!)

In addition to learning in this disputation that God is sovereign, we learn that God loves his people (1:2). God’s blessings and faithfulness to his people were not the result of their faithfulness, they were the product of his love. And God wants the truth about his universal greatness and unending love for his people to be known so that we will approach him rightly. Speaking and understanding the truth about God is part of our worship of him. A Christian must want to know the truth about God.

In a short biographical account of pastor George Buttrick, Thomas Long writes,

“George Buttrick...was [from 1927 to 1954] pastor of the Madison Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York. One week he had been off on a speaking engagement and was flying back to New York City. On the plane he had a pad and a pencil and he was making some notes for next Sunday’s sermon. The man seated next to him was eyeing him with curiosity. Finally, the curiosity got the best of him, and so he said to Buttrick, ‘I hate to disturb you – you’re obviously working hard on something – but what in the world are you working on?’

“ ‘Oh, I’m a Presbyterian minister,’ said Buttrick. ‘I’m working on

my sermon for Sunday.’

“ ‘Oh, religion,’ said the man. ‘I don’t like to get all caught up in the in’s and out’s and complexities of religion. I like to keep it simple. “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” The Golden Rule, that’s my religion.’

“ ‘I see,’ said Buttrick. ‘And what do you do?’

“ ‘I’m an astronomer. I teach at the university.’

“ ‘Oh, yes,’ said Buttrick. ‘Astronomy – I don’t like to get all caught up in the in’s and out’s and complexities of astronomy. Twinkle, twinkle, little star, that’s my astronomy.’”

Now, we might be amused by that story because we know that astronomy is enormously complex, and reducing it to a child’s song is absurd. Friend, God is there to be known, even more than the stars. And he has revealed the truth about himself to us. Knowing and understanding this truth is part of our worship of him.

Fearing God

Yet we are not only supposed to understand God, we are to fear him. That’s what we learn in the last dispute between God and the people.

Malachi 3:13-4:3

In this final dispute in Malachi, God rebuked the harsh words his people had used against him. In response, some of the people feared God (3:16), as they should have.

Throughout the Bible – from Genesis to Revelation (Genesis 22:12; Revelation 14:7) – we are instructed to fear the Lord. Fearing the Lord means having an ultimate regard for him. It means keeping our eye on him and giving our allegiance to him, because a day will come when the Lord will divide all humanity according to whether or not they have “revered” the Lord (Malachi 4:2).

Hoping in God

Which brings us to the last few verses of Malachi. In order to treat God rightly –

in order to worship him rightly- we must not only understand and fear him, we must put our hope in him.

Malachi 4:4-6

What an interesting way for the Old Testament to end! In this concluding word, the Lord instructed his people both to look back and to look forward. They were to look back to the Law of Moses, as God has repeatedly done throughout this little prophecy. But they were also to look forward to his coming, and the preparatory work of Elijah. God employed his last prophet before John the Baptist to remind God's people of the Law and the Prophets – Moses and Elijah, the same two who would stand with Jesus on the Mount of Transfiguration pointing to Jesus.

And Elijah did come. His name was John, and he came to baptize, to preach repentance, and to prepare God's people for the coming of the Messiah. Jesus then declared that Malachi's prophecy was fulfilled through this John the Baptist. After reading Malachi, we should not be surprised that the first spoken word of inspired prophecy after several centuries of silence was John the Baptist's call to "Repent!" (Matthew 3:2). Malachi had ended the Old Testament with the word "Curse," which can also be translated as "destruction." This is the same Old Testament that began with God and his perfect creation.

Through both John the Baptist and Malachi, then, the Lord called his people to repent of their indifference and lackadaisical disregard for him, and to remember God's commands by living them out. To put their hopes in him and his Word. To put faith in his promises. To live leaning forward into the promises of God! To put their weight into the truth of what God said. That's how you and I can really worship God: by living as if we believe him, by running with joyous abandon toward him, and by trusting that he will receive us as his own through Christ. This is the sincerity that we need!

I wonder if you noticed that the last phrase in the book begins with the words "or else" (4:6). The Old Testament began with a deadly choice in the Garden. Now it ends by holding out another choice: will we turn from that fatal choice made by the first Adam, which has been ratified ten thousand times in our own hearts? More specifically, will you turn to Jesus? That's the question that Malachi, the Old Testament, and the Bible leave you with today.

Questions for Reflection

1. Why do we tend to regard a person's sincerity as giving moral legitimacy to what that person says or thinks?
2. Why does God care so much about whom we marry?
3. How does your life reflect a concern for justice, particularly for the downtrodden and oppressed?
4. What does it mean to give "your best" to God? What is your best? What gets in the way of your giving your best to God?
5. Is there some area of your life that you are holding back from God? What is Malachi's message for you?
6. Can you worship someone you fear? Can you worship someone you don't fear? Explain.

Mark Dever, *The Message of the Old Testament* (adapted with changes)