

Worthless Worship

by Steve Zeisler

It has been well noted that the opposite of love is not hatred, but indifference. The last book of the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, is a love letter of sorts. It opens with a profound description of the love relationship that exists between God and humanity. Verse 2 of chapter I says, " 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How hast Thou loved us?' " One of the greatest questions humans can ask of God is his explanation of what his love means.

However, we are going to discover that that question was not asked because the people of Malachi's day cared for God, rather the question was asked with an air of casual indifference. The fact that these people had a disregard for the person, the power and holiness of God is obvious throughout the entire book. Thus Malachi addresses himself to the results that will surely follow when human beings treat God with indifference, when worship of God becomes a matter of routine, boredom and hypocrisy. The prophet notes that the breakdown of the family and the dissolution of society need to be addressed to a people who have lost their love for God. The questions asked over and over again throughout the book by the people of God of the prophet as God's representative betray a confusion of meaninglessness and lostness resulting from their having grown indifferent toward God and the things of God. So in order for this love letter to be what is needed for the people of that day, and the people of this day as well, the question of indifference toward God needs to be addressed forthrightly.

We have come to that point in verse 6 of chapter 1, which begins a fairly lengthy discourse that runs through verse 9 of chapter 2. This discourse, which is addressed formally to priests, opens with a question asked of the priests:

"If I am a master, where is my respect?", says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name.

Chapter 2, verse 1 marks the beginning of the second half of the discourse with a commandment for the priests:

"And now, this commandment is for you, O priests. "

The first half of the discourse details God's analysis of the problem of the people's loss of respect for him and their indifference toward him. Here God will explain and make obvious to the people how far they have fallen in this regard. Then in the second part of the discourse the Lord begins to talk about what he will do to answer the condition they have fallen into.

Let us read the first half of the discourse, then, beginning with verse 6, chapter 1:

"A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my respect? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised Thy name?' You are presenting defiled food upon my altar. But you say, 'How have we defiled Thee?' In that you say, 'The table of the Lord is to be despised.' But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the Lord of hosts. "But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will he receive any of you kindly?" says the Lord of hosts. "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you. For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name will be great among the nations, and in every

place incense is going to be offered to my name, and a grain offering that is pure; for my name will be great among the nations," says the Lord of hosts. But you are profaning it, in that you say, 'The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.' You also say, 'My how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the Lord of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery, and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the Lord. But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock, and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the Lord of hosts, "and my name is feared among the nations."

In order to love, the problem of indifference needs to be addressed straight on, so in this discourse the question, "Where is the respect, the honor that is due the Lord of hosts?" is asked.

"A son honors his father." Yesterday my two--year--old son and I spent most of the day together. Although he has brightly colored toys that were made expressly for two--year olds, all day long he was interested in doing whatever I was doing. If I had a screwdriver in my hand, he wanted a screwdriver in his hand; if I had a hose, he wanted to play with it. He was, in effect, recognizing that his father was bigger and more capable than he was, and he longed to be like me. By this he was expressing honor and respect, and showing a desire to be like his father. "A son honors his father . . . then if I am a father where is my honor," says the Lord of hosts."

Further, God says, servants respect their masters. One of the first lessons learned by anyone starting a new job is that the smartest way to do the job is the boss's way. You may not agree with your boss, you may think him a fool, but the best way to do things is his way. He controls your livelihood, he signs your paycheck, he determines your future career. You respect your employer because of the power and authority he holds. You offer him your respect or else you are out of a job. "If I am a master, where is My respect?" says the Lord of hosts."

In verse 8 God says, "When you present the blind for a sacrifice, isn't it evil? When you present the lame and the sick, isn't it evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased?" We respect the government that rules over us. Again, you are free to resent it, but you are not free to fail by your actions to respect the government. With its army, its courts, its powers to tax and its police force, the government can and does insist on your respect. The State of California is perfectly free to pay its debts with IOUs, but you are not free to pay the State of California with an IOU. Government forces us to respect it. One would be foolish to take on the power of the police by disrespecting government. Here the Lord is saying, "If I am master, if I am a father, where is the respect that is owed to me?"

Let us look a little closer at God's examination of these people's failure to respect him. At the time when Malachi preached the proper way for Israelites to indicate respect and honor for God, the proper way to worship him, the proper way to say by their actions that the Lord had first place in their life was through the sacrificial system in the law of Moses. Grain and fruit and animals were to be brought on various occasions to the temple and sacrificed on the altar of the Lord, so that the wholeheartedness and depth of spirit with which the people engaged in the sacrificial system indicated whether or not their heart was given to the Lord. But Malachi's analysis of this people was that they did not care for God at all. They had ceased to worship in the sacrificial system with anything like honor and respect for God. Their worship had become routine, had become a matter of convenience. Their actions clearly declared that they did not care; they were indifferent toward the Lord. The prophet mentions this in a number of places in this passage, but let me ask you to look at verses 13 and 14 in particular:

"You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the Lord of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery, and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the Lord.

Do you know anybody like that? Do you know anybody in the Christian church whose life reflects the problem described here? Do you know anybody who maintains contact with the community of God out of a sense of obligation and routine, because they do not know what else to do with themselves, because they have always done it that way but they are crushingly bored with the whole process? When they approach God the last thing

in the world they expect is responsiveness, life, interest, or enthusiasm. The things of God matter not a whit to them. The way you know that is because what they give, what they offer of themselves are the things that they value the least, the things "taken by robbery, the lame, the sick," the things that are useless to them. They let Jesus Christ be Lord over the things that they do not care about; he has the right to those things in their life, but nothing else.

In verse 14 the Lord says:

"But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock, and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord."

Do you know anybody like that? Have you ever met anybody in the Christian community who meets that description? Do you know someone who wants the respect of religious performance, someone who wants to be hailed for his vows, who likes prominence in the community, who makes a great point of having his name displayed where it will be seen by others, someone who promises great things but when the time comes to actually pay his vow he is a swindler, a hypocrite? Jesus spoke piercingly about such people, the Pharisees who stood on the street corner to pray, who broadened their phylacteries and made a point of calling attention to their religiosity, but inside they were rotten, he said; swindlers, hypocrites, he called them.

As we examine the lives of men and women to whom Malachi preached, it is appropriate for us to examine ourselves on precisely the same issues. The way that people in Malachi's day displayed by their actions their commitment to God was to carry out with their hearts the sacrificial system instituted by Moses. In Romans, Paul says that for us in the church age, the sacrifice, the presentation that we are to make is "our bodies as living sacrifices." Let us begin to ask ourselves have we by our actions indicated to the whole world that Jesus Christ has first place in our lives? Has the best we have to offer, the thing that delights us most, what costs us the most and matters to us the most, has this been given in any kind of conscious way to the Lord?

I am going to ask you to make that examination in some areas that we all deal with every day. Two obvious areas that I will not mention now (because Malachi is going to deal with them in much more detail later on) have to do with your family life and your money. But consider some other areas. I carry around in my pocket a calendar that has entered in it decisions I have made about what I will be doing with my time and energy, where I am going to spend days and hours of my week, what I will do with vacation time, what I will do with the responsibilities I have here at the church through next December and beyond. Most of you, I am sure, have calendars similar to mine. It is worth asking the question, Does my calendar reflect a sense that Jesus Christ is Lord of my time and energy? Have I given him the best of my time, what I value most about my time and energy? Have I made any attempt to display his Lordship over all of my life by some conscious choice concerning my time and my energy?

Looking out over this congregation I see some of the most creative people I have met in my life. They are brilliant people, capable people, men and women of science and technology in the great Silicon Valley industries who regularly have all kinds of creative insight in their job sphere, people whose homes are lovely, people with great ability to decorate their homes and work with their hands. Creativity of all kinds is possessed by the people in this room. I think it is worth asking ourselves the question, Is our creativity, is the best of our thinking in any sense given over to the purposes of God, or do we use up all of our mental energy and our ability to think and imagine and project on other things, then, later on, with what we value much less, apply ourselves to the things of God?

What makes you angry? What elicits an emotional response from you? That is a question worth asking. Some grade schools in Palo Alto were closed last year, and a few very angry meetings took place over which of them were going to be closed. Neighborhood associations banded together to announce to all the world that their neighborhood school should remain open and another closed instead. A tremendous amount of emotional energy was spent at these meetings, but most of it was selfish. Do we get angry over the things that God gets angry about? Is there righteous anger evident in us? Like the Lord, do we feel outraged when God's name is belittled, not when our rights are stepped on? There are a lot of questions we can ask ourselves if our bodies are to be given as a living sacrifice. It is good to ask whether or not our time and energy, our creativity, our anger, and all the rest of our resources are given over to the Lord and to his purposes.

The argument of chapter 2 is gathered up in verses 1 through 4. In these verses we see that the Lord is no longer analyzing the problem so much as he is saying what he is going to do to remedy the problem:

"And now, this commandment is for you, O priests. If you do not listen, and if you do not take it to heart to give honor to My name," says the Lord of hosts, "then I will send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings; and indeed, I have cursed them already, because you are not taking it to heart. Behold, I am going to rebuke your offspring, and I will spread refuse on your faces, the refuse of your feasts; and you will be taken away with it. Then you will know that I have sent this commandment to you, that My covenant may continue with Levi," says the Lord of hosts.

First, there is an appeal to repent ("Take it to heart to give honor to my name" v.1). All of the analysis, all of the biting description of the problem that these people face (as is given in chapter 1), leads up to the point where God is appealing to them to be different, to repent. Here he is begging them to change their hearts. But he recognizes that that is not happening and will not happen, so the second part of his argument here is to describe what actions he will take, to describe the necessary results, the curse that will follow their failure to repent (v.2-3). Then he tells them of the redemptive purpose behind his judgments. The rebuke comes so that they would then, he says in verse 4, "know that I have sent this commandment to you that my covenant may continue." Having told the people how sorry their condition is, he now announces the actions he will take to bring about repentance and restoration.

Let me ask you to look in particular at what he says the curse will consist of for the priests, who were the leaders of the nation at this point, the spiritual leaders of the community of God. It is always appropriate for the leadership to be addressed because they not only by their actions led the people into sin, but they were thrust into leadership because they represented the commitments of the people to sin. So in addressing the leaders God is seeing the people behind them. He says there were three things he was going to do to awaken them to their problem. First, he says, "I am going to curse your blessings." One of the things priests did-- perhaps the major thing they did-- was to announce to the people after the sacrifices had taken place that God had accepted them; to pronounce a word of blessing on the people. to say to them that their worship had been accepted before the Lord. But here the Lord says, "I am going to curse your blessings so that your ministry has no impact anymore, so that what you say is not believed. You can bless and say the words of God until your face turns blue but your words will have no impact at all." One of the sorriest people I can think of is an old minister whom nobody listens to anymore. He is a figurehead who is trotted out occasionally for weddings or funerals, but there is absolutely no power left in what he says. He is laughed at, not listened to, and kept as a kind of relic for state occasions, but his blessings have long since been cursed. That is what the Lord is talking about here. To the priests he says, "Your livelihood will be a sham. You won't be able to do anybody any good anymore."

Then he says, "I am going to rebuke your offspring." That is somewhat difficult to interpret, although I think "offspring" is the proper translation here. He is talking about the children of the priests. There are two ways to think of that. One is to see in how many--generations parents who have grown indifferent toward God find that their children rebel. Parents who have stopped loving, serving and caring about God cannot pass on the routine to their children any longer; their children are not willing to play the game. The statement in verse 13, "My, how tiresome it is!" becomes the answer to the question, "Why are you no longer interested in God's church, young person?" "Because nobody is talking about the real issues anymore. Because nobody is talking about life or reality. Nobody cares, nobody believes it, so why should I be concerned?" the child responds.

It is useful also to notice that the priests passed on leadership, that the next generation of leaders were the offspring of the priests, those who would next lead the nation. It is also true that Christian leaders who have grown indifferent toward God reproduce themselves everywhere, thus the blight spreads; the next generation of Christian leadership is as cursed as its forebears. There is a sense in which decisions made to be indifferent, to be unconcerned for God have effects that ripple out to generation after generation. "I will curse your offspring," says the Lord.

Lastly, God says, "I am going to spread refuse, garbage, on your faces." Here is a terrible, personal kind of

defilement, a rejection of the person himself--not merely his office or his blessings--but a rejection of the individual himself. The problem of indifference, lovelessness and dishonor toward God is a very serious one. Here God, in effect, is taking hold of the leadership of his nation by the collar and shaking them so that they will repent, so that they will wake up to the horrible experience that they are leading in.

Verses 10 and 11 of chapter 1 are a good place for us to end if we are going to examine ourselves:

"Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the Lord of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you."

If we determine by an honest self-examination that the whole thing is a sham, that we really consider God and his purposes a source for laughter and boredom, if there is no willingness to give him anything of value in our lives, then we are better off doing without than to continue the charade. We are better off not continuing to show up and smile in a phony manner, just being involved enough so that people will not talk about us behind our backs, than to continue to give time, energy, whatever, that we do not value at all. We are better off closing the gates, is the cry of the prophet speaking in God's name. Recall the example of Christ. The temple had become a place for greedy moneychangers, for people who were trying to get rich in God's name . . . You can see the Son of God with a whip of cords in his hand coming into the temple and stopping the sacrifices from happening because all was worthless, lifeless and spiritless. God is saying the same to us. If we do not care at all then we are better off quitting, staying home, sleeping in, whatever.

Lastly, it is important to notice in verse 11 of chapter 1 that all of these things, all of this appeal for self-examination does not come because God needs us, as if he is somehow diminished without us. The Lord is not wringing his hands, feeling sorry for himself and pouting because he does not have our respect. His concern that we respect him is for our benefit. Men and women whose respect for God is full, and therefore whose love for God is deep, are the happiest and most productive and most filled with life themselves.

God is saying to this people, "All the world is filled with worshipers of me. 'From the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to my name, and a grain offering that is pure; for my name will be great among the nations,' says the Lord of hosts." God is appealing to us to love him for our sake because he is loved on every side. Creation is groaning to be released to respond in love and honor to its Lord. Myriads upon myriads of angels are before his face at all times shouting their praises and adoration. It is a very humbling thing to go to other places in the world, sometimes even among non--Christians around us, and see how magnificent is the response to the love of God. In some parts of the world Christians have to weigh whether or not they should sacrifice a month's salary to buy a book that will help them understand the Scriptures. For some that is a real question, so great is their concern to know about the love of God. I have seen people who lived a lifetime fearing to pray, not believing God would ever hear them, break down in tears when they discovered that the Lord would hear their prayers. Then I took at myself. I have to have almost optimal conditions to even get around to praying.

People who have all the advantages, as the Israelites had all the advantages, as we have all the advantages, need to be urged to love and respect God not because he needs it--evidence of that is that people with all the disadvantages of spiritual life love him with all their hearts--people like us need to be urged to love God because it is what we need, because it is life-giving to us. " 'I am a great King,' says the Lord of hosts, 'And My name is feared among the nations.' "

Heavenly Father, we ask that you will help us take to heart the words of the prophet as he looked at his people and realized that though there was much religion there was little love; though there were flurries of activity there was no honor. Lord, make us the kind of people we ought to be. In Jesus' name. Amen.

Malachi 1:6-2:9
Ninth message
Steve Zeisler
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