

Malachi: Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy

Apathy Towards Marriage (Malachi 2:10-16)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on May 2, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ One distinctive in our corporate worship is the priority of expository preaching – where we’re committed to letting the text of Scripture direct and inform *what* we say in the pulpit and *how* we say it. **That means we make every effort to ensure that the topic and the tone of our sermons match the topic and tone of the passage we’re preaching.**
 - That’s a commitment we make up front and one we try to consistently stick to, so that when we arrive at a passage that addresses a difficult subject and carries a sharper tone, you know we’re not going to shy away from it. And you know that we’re not looking to be controversial or unnecessarily harsh in our preaching. We’re just looking to faithfully reflect and proclaim the topic and tone of the text.

- ❖ And since we’re in a prophetic book like Malachi, it’s to be expected that our passage will carry a prophetic tone – a sharp tone that may cut to the heart (Acts 2:37). **But be assured that Malachi is not like a madman wielding a knife but more like a surgeon working with a scalpel.** He’s going to cut. It’s going to hurt. But it’s intended to do good – to excise what’s causing harm in order to heal body and soul.
 - **So I say all of that in advance because this morning we’re going to expose the spiritual dangers of mixed faith marriages and of divorce.** These are sensitive topics because they hit close to home for some of us. And since they’re such personal topics, preaching them publicly might be viewed as inappropriate. But what we need to realize – which is a point that Malachi makes – is that our private affairs can have public consequences.
 - **Whom you marry and whether you stay married may feel like your own business or a private family matter, but these matters have public consequences for the entire covenant community of God.** That would be Israel in Malachi’s day and the Church in our day. So that’s why we’re going to tackle these private topics in our public worship. Because it’s there in the text and because it impacts the health of our worshipping community.

- ❖ In our passage, a key word pops up five times. It’s the word “faithless”. Other translations say “to deal treacherously” (NASB), “to break faith” (NIV), or “to betray” (NLT). It’s the same Hebrew word found in other prophetic books for any act of unfaithfulness to a spouse.
 - **So the theme of our text is faithlessness to your vows – whether to each other or to God.** If you’ve betrayed the covenant that binds you to your spouse, then you’re more likely to betray the covenant that binds you to the Lord. **A dismissive attitude towards the covenant of marriage reveals an underlying apathy in your covenantal relationship with God.** And not only is your oneness with God threatened, betraying marriage will result in betraying your covenant community. It threatens the oneness of God’s people. So there is far more at stake than just what goes on in your private life.
 - Now I’ve divided this message into three sections. First, we’ll look at the profaneness of mixed faith marriages. Second, we’ll consider the betrayal of divorce. And third, we’ll talk about the hope of godly offspring.

The Profaneness of Mixed Faith Marriages

- ❖ Let's begin by examining the profaneness of mixed faith marriages. **In vv10-12, Malachi addresses the growing problem of Israelites marrying someone outside of the Jewish faith.** Recall with me that these Israelites have returned to their homeland after the Babylonian exile. It's been sixty to seventy years. This is a new generation of Israelites – the same generation you read about in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. **It was a time marked by spiritual apathy and spiritual compromise, particularly related to marriage.** The problem we find addressed in our passage is dealt with in Ezra 9-10.

- ❖ Let me read v10 again, "*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?*" Notice Malachi's emphasis on the spiritual oneness of God's people. He stresses how the Israelites share *one* Father and *one* Creator God. There is a deep unity and oneness marking the covenant community of God. And yet they threaten that oneness with their faithlessness.
 - **Malachi goes on to accuse the people of profaning the covenant of their fathers.** That is, the covenant the LORD made with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. A promise to bless them, so that through their offspring, they would be a blessing to all nations.
 - But they have profaned and desecrated that covenant, and not only that, v11 says that they've profaned and desecrated the temple. "*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.*"

- ❖ **What could Judah have done to have caused such desecration?** What wrong did these Israelites commit? Look back at v11. "*For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.*" So the desecration of the covenant and temple resulted from marrying the daughters of the surrounding pagan nations. Now let's be clear. **The problem had nothing to do with mixing ethnicities. It was about mixing faiths.** Notice the stress on marrying a daughter *of a foreign god*.
 - In fact, Scripture is replete with mixed race marriages. Probably the best example would be Boaz marrying Ruth the Moabite. But a key moment in Ruth's narrative is her conversion, abandoning her pagan gods and committing herself to the LORD, the God of Naomi, her widowed mother-in-law.
 - **So Scripture affirms two people of different ethnicities becoming one flesh in the covenant of marriage.** Any Christian or church that condemns mixed race marriages has no biblical grounds to stand on. Mixed race marriages are God-honoring, God-pleasing, beautiful unions.

- ❖ But Malachi has mixed *faith* marriages in mind. Now what's the difference? **Why would a mixed race marriage be considered beautiful in the eyes of God – but a mixed faith marriage be called faithless and profane?** It has to do with allegiance. The God of Israel demands absolute allegiance from his people. You shall have no other gods before me. You shall not bow down to them or serve them, for I the LORD your God am a jealous God. **The LORD God does not share his throne.**

- ❖ So for an Israelite to become one flesh with another – to enter into the spiritual union of marriage – with someone whose allegiance is given to another father, who worships another creator, would be to violate the covenant that binds you to God. **Because you and your spouse are one flesh in his eyes, your mixed allegiance is a betrayal of your ultimate allegiance to him.** It's also a betrayal of the covenant community – with whom you share one holy calling as one holy chosen people. Mixed faith marriages compromise the holy status and mission of God's people as witnesses of his holiness to all the peoples of the earth.

- ❖ Remember that under the Old Covenant, God's covenant people was identifiable as a particular ethnic group with its own distinct cultural and religious practices. **To be Jewish is unique in that it is both a religious and ethnic identity – an identity that is passed down from parents to children, from one generation to the next.**
 - So from ancient Judaism to modern Judaism, there has always been a concern over mixed faith marriages. In recent Pew surveys, Jewish Americans tend to poll higher than other religious groups in their prevalence towards mixed faith marriages.¹ **That's led a growing number of leaders within the Jewish community to express alarm over the slow erosion of a distinct Jewish identity.** Because a large majority of those mixed faith marriages are *not* raising their children in the Jewish faith.
 - That relates to the concern that Malachi raises in v15 – the concern for godly offspring. **Both ancient and modern efforts to deter mixed faith marriages within the Jewish community are viewed as a fight for the survival of the Jewish people.** From the viewpoint of a persecuted minority, the gradual loss of a distinct Jewish identity is considered an existential threat.

- ❖ Now rabbis who raise this concern are quick to clarify that they are not opposed to the marrying of Gentiles per se – as long as the Gentile converts or commits to raising any offspring as Jews. Ethnicity is not the issue. It's faith. **As long as you circumcise your sons, keep the Passover, and maintain other Jewish practices, you are raising your children as Jews.** Jewish identity and Jewish community is preserved.
 - But the solution is not as straightforward for Christians. We are under a different covenant than Jews though we both claim to worship the God of Abraham. **And a key characteristic of the New Covenant is that the new covenant community of God is no longer tied to ethnicity.** Unlike Israel, the Church is not an ethnic people group.

- ❖ **Under the New Covenant, we don't expand the people of God by giving birth – but by leading people to experience the new birth.** In other words, you might be able to raise your kids as Jewish, but you can't raise your kids as Christians. Now you can (and should) raise your kids with Christian values and teaching in a Christian environment, but you can't pass down a Christian identity to them. Your children must be born again, which occurs – not by the will of the flesh nor the will of man – but by the grace of God.

¹ Pew Research Center: [A Portrait of Jewish Americans \(2013\)](#); [America's Changing Religious Landscape \(2014\)](#)

- ❖ Does that then mean mixed faith marriages are no longer a concern under the New Covenant? If salvation results from the grace of God and not the particular way you raise your kids, then does it *not* matter if your spouse is of another faith or holds to no faith at all?
 - **If that’s your conclusion, you’re underestimating the influence exerted by two godly parents seeking to raise their children in a gospel-rich environment.** And I don’t just mean agreeing to send your kids to church. In his book, *Handing Down the Faith: How Parents Pass Their Religion on to the Next Generation*, sociologist **Christian Smith** draws conclusions from years of research following the religious lives of American young people.
 - He concludes, *“In almost every case, no other institution or program comes close to shaping youth religiously as their parents do—not religious congregations, youth groups, faith-based schools, missions and service trips, summer camps, Sunday school, youth ministers, or anything else. Those - influences can reinforce the influence of parents, but almost never do they surpass or override it. What makes every other influence pale into virtual insignificance is the importance (or not) of the religious beliefs and practices of American parents in their ordinary lives—not only on holy days but every day, throughout weeks and years.”*

- ❖ **Smith goes on to argue that, statistically-speaking, American youth who have grown up to be religiously committed almost always had parents who themselves were religiously committed.** Now, of course, there are exceptions. I would be an exception, having grown up in a non-religious home. But exceptions just reinforce our earlier point that the salvation of your children ultimately rests in the grace of God.
 - But even so, statistically-speaking, mixed faith marriages result in less religiously committed children compared to marriages where parents share the same faith.² **From a Christian perspective, mixed faith marriages face challenges that make it less conducive for children to be raised in an environment where they are regularly exposed to the gospel – the one thing that can save them.**

- ❖ Now some of you might be thinking, "Well, we weren't planning to have kids anyways so this concern doesn't concern us." **But before you too quickly dismiss what I’m saying, just remember Malachi’s concern that your primary allegiance remain with the Lord.** In that sense, a mixed faith marriage will still profane the New Covenant just as it does the Old.
 - **You see, every marriage is centered on something.** Very often it's a set of shared values and aspirations in life. And some religions share enough values in common that adherents from differing faiths can marry and still experience a good deal of harmony.

² See Naomi Schaefer Riley’s book *‘Til Faith Do Us Part: How Interfaith Marriage Is Transforming America*

- ❖ Sure, there will need to be some practical compromises when it comes to deciding where you'll regularly worship (if at all) and how you'll observe religious holidays. But with enough mutual respect, you can make it work because in the end you share so many of the same values and aspirations, even if your religious practices differ.
 - But that kind of arrangement doesn't work for Christianity. **Because at the center of Christianity is not a set of values or religious practices – but a person.** The person of Jesus Christ with whom every Christian is bound in a covenant relationship.

- ❖ **So imagine the difficulty of orbiting your life around Jesus at the gravitational center while trying to live as one flesh with a spouse who is orbiting around something or someone else (even if that someone is you).** Two satellites orbiting around two different gravitational centers may find that their paths are aligned for a while. But for how long? With different gravitational centers, they're set on a collision course.

- ❖ **In the same way, you might find the person you're dating (or married to) is so aligned with you that your faith differences seem negligible compared to all that you hold in common.** But there are only three plausible outcomes. **(1)** Either your non-Christian spouse is somehow converted, which I know is your heart's desire. But like with your kids, it's not something you can accomplish or guarantee. **(2)** You and your non-Christian spouse collide at some point in the future, resulting in a lot of hurt, pain, and potentially divorce.
 - **(3)** You slowly re-center your life around whatever it is your spouse is orbiting (even if that something is seemingly harmless like your own family) and you have a harmonious marriage. But Christ is no longer at the center of your life, and in that sense, you've betrayed and profaned his New Covenant. Sadly, from my observation, the third outcome seems the most likely.

- ❖ **This is why the NT reinforces that God's people should marry within the community of faith.** For example, in **1 Corinthians 7:39**, the Apostle Paul instructs those who have the opportunity to marry that they are free to marry whom they wish but *“only in the Lord”* (cf. 2 Cor 6:14). Only someone in a covenant relationship with the Lord. I hope you see that these are not arbitrary rules. The concern is for your covenant relationship with God, your offspring's relationship with God, and for the witness of our covenant community – to communicate that Christ is Lord and the only One worthy to be in the Center of our lives.

The Betrayal of Divorce

- ❖ Now in vv12-13, Malachi talks about a second thing the Israelites do in response to God's judgment against their covenantal faithlessness. But before we look at this second thing they do, I want to focus on vv14-16 and the betrayal of divorce. **Because I think the issue of divorce is not a third thing they do, but rather related to the first thing, which is covenantal faithlessness.** So look at v14. Here the Israelites are questioning why the LORD is displeased with them and why he rejects their worship, *“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.”*

- ❖ So that the same key words of *faithless* and *covenant* keep showing up. The point is that divorce is another act of betrayal to the covenant before God and before the covenant community. We're probably dealing with related scenarios. We can imagine an Israelite man divorcing his first wife (the Jewish wife of his youth) in order to marry a pagan wife.
 - Now we can learn a lot about God's intent for marriage from v14 alone. **Notice how the LORD serves as a witness to our marriage covenants, which is the goal of a wedding ceremony.** To make public vows with God as your primary witness. Notice as well how the man's wife is called his "*companion*". That word is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to a close friend with whom you have shared interests. **Which implies that God intends for closeness and affection between spouses.** Marriage should not be a means for societal advancement or monetary gain.

- ❖ And notice, as well, how she's described as "*your wife by covenant*". In ancient cultures and ancient law codes (i.e. Code of Hammurabi), marriage was treated as a contractual agreement between a man and his wife. **But the God of Israel designed marriage as a covenant that points to the covenant he made with his people.**
 - In a contract, partners commit to each another based on certain conditions being met. You stick with a contractual partner because they've met the conditions and therefore deserve your relationship. They've earned it. **But in a covenant, partners commit to one another without conditions.** They exchange love and commitment – not as a reward for meeting conditions – but as a gift of grace without a view to conditions.

- ❖ **Malachi continues in v15 to affirm God's original intent for marriage, grounding opposition to divorce in the creation order established in the beginning.** He alludes to **Genesis 2:24** when he says, "*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.*"
 - This way of arguing *for* the permanence of marriage and *against* the frivolousness of most divorces that occur reminds me of Jesus' response in **Matthew 19:3-9**. He also grounds his opposition to divorce in God's original design in Genesis 2:24 – **for marriage to be an inseparable one flesh union.** Mosaic Law made some accommodations for divorce because of the hardness of human hearts. **In other words, the Law was given to regulate what was a common yet cruel practice of sending away wives for frivolous reasons.** But Jesus made it clear that God intended for the permanence of marriage – for no one to separate what he has joined together.

- ❖ **Now in Matthew 19, Jesus does give the exception clause – a legitimate grounds for divorce would be in cases of sexual immorality (i.e. adultery).** But even in such situations, divorce is not necessarily prescribed but merely allowed.
 - **But here in Malachi, what's in view is the kind of divorce that stems from a spirit of covenantal faithlessness and betrayal.** It's the most common explanation for divorce in our day. We just fell out of love. We drifted apart. We're different people. That's why v15 ends with a warning to guard yourself in your spirit.

- ❖ Now v16 concludes with an even stronger warning. *“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.”*
 - There are some textual discrepancies in this verse. Which results in two competing translations in English. Essentially, some translations (like the ESV) emphasize the man's hate for the wife of his youth. But other translations (like the NIV) emphasize God's hate for divorce. There are good arguments for both options.
 - But in either case, the overall message is clear. **God opposes divorce. And by divorcing your spouse, you commit a grievous offense.** By not only violating creation order, but by betraying the covenantal relationship with your spouse. And in so doing, you cause great harm. I think that's what Malachi refers to when he speaks of covering your garment with violence. **Divorce has a ruinous effect on your spouse and any children in the home.**

- ❖ Remember, Malachi says the reason God designed marriage to be an inseparable one flesh union is because he was seeking godly offspring. **Think about it: If a child grows up watching his parents treat their marriage covenant as negotiable, then it's no surprise if that child grows up to treat his or her covenantal relationship with God as negotiable.** And beyond your family, divorce has a ruinous effect on your covenant community by profaning the church's witness and ability to fulfill our mission as the set-apart people of God. For all these reasons, God hates divorce.

- ❖ **But what's heartbreaking is that worshippers in the temple in Malachi's day and worshippers in the church in our day – don't see divorce or mixed faith marriages as displeasing to the LORD and continue to bring their offerings of praise without realizing God is offended.** Or if they realize God is rejecting their worship, they're not making the connection with their covenantal faithlessness in marriage.
 - Listen to v12, *“¹²May 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! ¹³And 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 favor from your hand.”*

- ❖ Notice how they experience the sorrows that you can expect as a result from cases of divorce or mixed faith marriages. There are tears, with weeping and groaning. **But the question is whether this is merely worldly sorrow that leads nowhere – or godly sorrow that leads to repentance (2 Cor 7:10).**
 - Now what does repentance look like? **For those of you who are merely contemplating divorce**, it means *not* to rush headlong into it but to examine yourself and guard your spirit. And repentance looks like asking others for prayer and accountability and seeking counseling and support. **And for those of you in a mixed faith relationship but not yet married**, repentance means *not* to rush to the altar but to seriously consider the consequences of the inevitable collision.

- ❖ But what's even more challenging is to determine what repentance looks like for someone who is already divorced or already in a mixed faith marriage. **For those of you who are divorced**, it would mean not rushing into a second marriage but to seriously examine the biblical arguments for the legitimacy of remarriage.
 - **And for those of you in a mixed faith**, repentance certainly means to acknowledge and confess to the Lord that you displeased him by not marrying in the Lord. **But at the same time, it certainly does not mean abandoning or divorcing your unbelieving spouse.** 1 Corinthians 7 says you are to remain loyal to your marriage covenant, and it goes on to say that your unbelieving spouse and children are made holy because of you (1 Cor 7:14) – in the sense that they're living under the same roof as you and being under your gospel influence. **But, of course, the question is whether you are influencing them or are they influencing you?**

The Hope of Godly Offspring

- ❖ Friends, I realize these verses have cut some of you to the heart pretty deep. You're feeling uncomfortable hearing this preached. **But rest assured, though a surgeon's scalpel feels uncomfortable, the goal is good – to bring healing and wholeness.** So let me end with an emphasis on the hope of godly offspring.
- ❖ As we've already noted, mixed faith marriages and divorce betray God's intent for all marriages – but especially the marriages of his covenant people. **For he desires our children to be raised in a gospel-rich context, so that they might be saved and share in the faith of their parents and continue a spiritual legacy.** That's the hope of godly offspring.
 - But you could argue that an even deeper concern was underlying the need to preserve a distinct Jewish identity in the days of Malachi. **It was the messianic hope of a godly seed to come through Israel.** The phrase *godly offspring* can be literally translated "seed of God" It harkens back to the Genesis 3 promise that the seed (or offspring) of the woman would one day crush the head of the serpent. That messianic promise preserved in the lineage of Israel gives a deeper significance to the hope of godly offspring.
 - **Because in the fullness of time, God sent forth his Son – the Seed of God, the Offspring of the woman – to redeem us from our sins.** Unlike Israel before him, he remained faithful to the covenant and gave his life and shed his blood to secure for us a New Covenant enacted on better promises.
- ❖ Friends, no matter what choices you've made in the past – even if they displeased the Lord at the time you made them – **the message of the gospel says that you can be forgiven and your life can still be pleasing to the Lord if you place your faith and all your hope in the Seed of God, in Jesus the Messiah.**
 - And when it comes to your marriage, your hope for renewed love and commitment towards your spouse – for renewed strength to be faithful to your vows – is found in the Godly Offspring who is ever faithful. Who will never leave us nor forsake us. Who will never break covenant with his Bride. This is the Jesus of our gospel.