

Malachi: Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy

Do We Love God? (Malachi 1:6-14)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on April 18, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ Last week, we started a new series in the book of Malachi that we're calling: *Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy*. And as we saw, the book begins with an affirmation of God's love for his people. Though, by now, they've returned from exile, Israel is still struggling to establish herself. She's impoverished and still under foreign rule. And yet in spite of the bleak circumstances, the LORD reminds Israel that he set his love on her in the ancient past.
 - **It was a love rooted in God's sovereign freedom to love whomever he chooses to love – with no view to your worth or merit.** And so if he sets his love on you before you're born – before even the foundation of the world – with no consideration of your worthiness or goodness, then you know his love is secure. If you did nothing to gain his love, why would you fear losing it because of something you did or failed to do?

- ❖ So the Israelites in Malachi's day can rest assured that the LORD loves them. And yet they don't feel his love. They question it. There is a confrontational tone in Malachi. The LORD keeps contending with his people, calling out their spiritual apathy, but they continually question and dispute the charges. We'll see this pattern of the LORD making a charge and the people refuting it. The LORD says *this*, but you say, "How have we done *that*?"
 - In today's text, the LORD takes issue with their worship. He directs his charge at the priests who oversee temple worship, but the problem extends to the people – to every worshipper bringing a sacrifice for God. **The LORD is going to describe their worship as polluted.** They're offering polluted sacrifices. But notice what makes this polluted worship. Notice how it's not because they're worshipping false gods.

- ❖ Other prophets, in their books, call out Israel for her spiritual adultery. For chasing after false gods and bowing to idols. But that's not what Malachi is doing. He's not accusing the people of worshipping other gods. It's not spiritual adultery that's the problem. It's spiritual apathy.
 - **Malachi is not dealing with the *who* of worship but the *how*.** The people are worshipping the right God. They're offering sacrifices to Yahweh. No confusion there. They got the *who* right. But *how* are they worshipping the LORD? How you worship matters. **How you worship God reveals what you think of God.**
 - And the way the Israelites were worshipping in Malachi's day revealed a rather low view of God. Based on how they worshipped, one could conclude that they had lost both love and respect for God. Not enough to forfeit the faith or their religious duty. But as they go through the motions of worship, it was characterized by spiritual apathy. This is what polluted their worship.

- ❖ And this is where we need to ask ourselves the tough questions. Sure, we're not here to worship any other god but the LORD God. But *how* are we worshipping him? **And what does the way we worship God reveal about what we think of him?**
 - We live in a consumer-driven, entertainment-saturated culture. If we let those cultural forces shape our attitude when we come to church – if I show up expecting to be served with my favorite songs and an entertaining message that helps me overcome this or that problem – then it reveals some underlying assumptions about God.

- ❖ **That attitude reveals that the God whom I worship is merely a personal God who serves my needs and keeps me entertained.** And let's acknowledge how this pandemic has created a dilemma where many churches have begun to live-stream their services. Now I'm not arguing whether it was wise or justifiable to do so during a pandemic. That's not my point.
 - My only point is that if the *how* of your worship consistently involves sitting by yourself, in your room, staring at a screen (the same screen you use for Netflix) – then it's no surprise if your view of the LORD begins to resemble a personal God here to serve your needs and to keep you entertained.
- ❖ How you worship God reveals what you think of God. **And for the Israelites of Malachi's day, their polluted worship of the one true God was very revealing.** As we study our text, we'll learn three things about polluted worship. First, what polluted worship expresses about our God. Second, what polluted worship exposes about our hearts. Third, what polluted worship embezzles from our King.

What Polluted Worship Expresses About Our God

- ❖ Let's begin by considering what polluted worship expresses about our God – at least about our particular vision of God. In our text, Malachi is greatly concerned with temple reform. He's calling out the priests for their laxness in allowing worshippers to offer unfit sacrifices to the LORD. They were desecrating the holy altar in the holy temple of the Holy God.
 - **But what becomes obvious is that Malachi cares about temple reform – not just because he cares about worship being conducted in a proper, orderly manner – but because he understands that how we worship reveals what we think of God.**
- ❖ **And so he begins with an argument from the lesser to the greater.** It's an effective rhetorical device. If you appeal to a shared assumption with your audience, you're more persuasive when you show how their behavior is inconsistent with that shared assumption.
 - So listen to v6, *"A son honors his father, and a servant his master."* In Malachi's day, there would've been no objections to that. Everyone would agree that sons should honor their fathers and servants ought to fear their masters (lords). **But if that's so, then why do you neither honor nor fear the LORD – who is both a Father and Master (Lord) over Israel?**
 - Keep reading in v6, *"If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, 'How have we despised your name?'"*
- ❖ **So the appropriate response to God as our Father and Lord is honor and respect (another word for the fear or reverence mentioned here) – but the priests of Israel were treating the LORD worse than human authority figures.** Showing less honor and respect than we would give to our earthly fathers and masters. Now, again, the people as a whole are guilty, but the LORD singles out the priests because they're responsible for leading everyone in God-honoring, God-fearing worship. And yet they're failing in their duty.

- ❖ But the priests appear to be clueless to how they're failing. They immediately question how they've despised the name of God. **It goes to show how blind we can be to the ways in which we dishonor God in worship.** It's another reason why a sermon like this on a topic like this is so necessary. We need God to confront our polluted worship with a prophetic word, or we might continue blind to it. This is a severe mercy.

- ❖ **The LORD goes on in v7 to explain that they despised his name by accepting polluted sacrifices on his altar.** Listen to his words, *“By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, ‘How have we polluted you?’ By saying that the LORD’s table may be despised.”*
 - Polluted, understood in ritual terms, refers to something unclean. And the next verse explains that they weren't offering unclean animals but rather clean animals that were unfit for sacrifice due to blemish. Mosaic law required the animals to be without physical blemish (Ex 12:5; Lev 1:3, 10). And in Leviticus 22:18-25, the law specifically prohibited the offering of blind, lame, or mutilated animals.
 - But the point here is that these offerings were polluted primarily by the worshipper's attitude towards God and only secondarily by the quality of the offering itself. The priests pick up on that. Notice their response is to ask, *“How have we polluted you (God)?”* **Even they recognized that a polluted offering pollutes God – because it reveals what we really think of God.**

- ❖ Now you might be wondering how God can be polluted. Well, it's not suggesting that God himself becomes unclean or imperfect by a polluted sacrifice. **But it is saying that God's reputation is polluted or soiled. His name is despised.** The priests were *“saying that the LORD's table may be despised.”* Now whether they actually told people it was okay to despise the altar is questionable. But their actions spoke louder than words. **By accepting these polluted offerings, they were sending a signal suggesting that God is not all that holy.** He's not all that special. He's not someone you really need to fear. And it's that attitude towards God that pollutes worship.

- ❖ Now in vv8-9, Malachi reinforces his point by returning to that argument from the lesser to the greater. Arguing that you wouldn't treat human authorities in this way. Listen to v8, *“When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor; will he accept you or show you favor? says the LORD of hosts.”*
 - **Malachi's point is that you don't need God's law to tell you that a polluted offering is an insulting, demeaning gift.** Intuition alone tells you not to give such a gift to a governor. Malachi had in mind either a regional Persian official or a Persian-appointed Jewish governor like Nehemiah. Either way, it was common for the Israelites to give a tribute to such officials, either to meet a quota or to curry favor.

- ❖ Malachi is saying, “You wouldn’t dare give a blind or lame animal to the governor.” Or if he were speaking to us, he’d say, “You wouldn’t dare send your in-laws a Christmas fruit basket filled with rotten or half-eaten fruit. Or if you were invited to dinner at your boss’s house, you wouldn’t bring a half-empty bottle of your cheapest wine.” You know better than that.
 - **So what does it say about how you view God if you treat him with less respect than you’d treat your boss or your in-laws?** It appears that you fear their opinion more than you fear God’s. Their approval seems to matter more to you than God’s.
 - Malachi goes on in v9 to dare them to try this with God. See if you can get away with it. *"And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts."*

- ❖ The LORD goes on to say in v10 that it would be better to shut the doors of the temple and stop all sacrifices, than to perpetuate such polluted worship. *"Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain! I have no pleasure in you, says the LORD of hosts, and I will not accept an offering from your hand."*
 - **God would rather we stop worshipping altogether than to give worshippers the false impression that he is pleased by their polluted worship.** God is not pleased – because how we worship reveals what we think of God. And so if we give him offerings that mean little to us, then it reveals how little God himself means to us. **If our worship of him is cheap and poor, then it reveals how poorly we revere his name and how cheaply we view his glory.**

- ❖ Now we’re no longer bringing animal sacrifices because Christ offered up, in his body, a final sacrifice for sin that fulfills the sacrificial system under the Old Covenant. **As New Covenant worshippers, we are a holy priesthood, and each of us can offer spiritual sacrifices through Christ every time we gather for corporate worship** (1 Pet 2:5).
 - Now what are these spiritual sacrifices that Christians can bring to God? Let’s consider an example that suits the context of Malachi. **Let’s talk about monetary offerings that we bring to God in Christian corporate worship.** It’s often called the tithe, which is a topic that comes up in chapter 3 as an issue by which the Israelites dishonor God and rob from him.

- ❖ Now for Malachi’s audience, being under the Old Covenant, the tithe was mandatory. They were obliged to give the first tenth of their crops or income. But for New Covenant believers like us, the Mosaic law and its stipulations on tithing within the sacrificial system were all fulfilled in Christ. So when we speak of tithing as Christians, it would fall more under the category of a free will offering. It’s not a law for Christians.
 - **But many churches, including ours, would still encourage worshippers to tithe – to give at least ten percent of their annual income to the ministry of their church.** The idea behind this is *not* because it would be a transgression of the law to give any less than ten percent. No, again this doesn’t pertain to law anymore. This pertains to grace – the grace we receive in the gospel of salvation.

- ❖ If we, as Christians – as recipients of a better covenant, enacted on better promises and established by blood that speaks a better word – if we are to give less than OT saints – **if we make less of a sacrifice though we've received more grace – then what does that say about our view of God and his gracious salvation in Christ?**
- ❖ Wouldn't it be an insult? Wouldn't it despise his name if we gave even less or nothing at all? How we worship God reveals what we think of God. **So how we give back to God out of the resources he's already given us – reveals what we think of him and his grace to save us and sustain us, to give us our daily bread and provide our every need.**
 - Imagine you owed millions of dollars in debt to a lender – a debt you could never repay. But imagine if he graciously forgave your loan and set you free from that crippling amount of debt. **If you would instinctually bring to your lender as nice of a gift of gratitude as you can afford** – knowing it's a microscopic fraction of what you truly owe – then what does that reveal about what you think of God and his forgiveness if even the topic of giving or tithing makes you uncomfortable?

What Polluted Worship Exposes About Our Hearts

- ❖ Friends, if the Word of God is making you uncomfortable, just remember, it's a severe mercy. God is trying to expose something in your heart in order to heal it. That leads to our second lesson. We saw how polluted worship expresses what we think about our God. It also exposes what we feel about him. Let's consider what polluted worship exposes about our hearts.
 - **And let's be clear, it's what is in our hearts that matters most to God.** Human authorities, like the governor mentioned in v8, are going to focus on the gift itself. They care about the quality or quantity of what you bring. They can't read your heart motives. So they can only judge based on the gift they see.
- ❖ But God can do what human authorities cannot. **He can see your motives, so he's more concerned with the quality of your heart than the quality of your gift.** That's important to stress because I know, at first glance, Malachi makes it sound as if God's main concern is to ensure he receives the highest quality goods – that anything less than the best is an insult.
 - **And yes, on one hand, for the worshipper who has an unblemished animal to give and yet doesn't offer it, God takes issue because of what that says about his heart.** In v14, there's an example of a man who has an unblemished animal in his flock, vows it to God, but then swaps it with a blemished animal. That's a problem.
- ❖ **But the kind of polluted worship confronted here would not apply, for example, to the faithful widow who caught Jesus's eye in the temple courts.** The widow who gave a measly two copper coins, which amounted to one cent. She was commended for her sacrifice even though her offering paled in comparison to what the rich were bringing. Because Jesus could see in her heart, and he knew she was giving in faith because it was all that she had.
 - So I don't want you to get the impression that God cares first and foremost about the external quality or quantity of what you have to offer in worship. He only cares about it to the extent that it reveals the internal motivations and attitudes of your heart.

- ❖ **I hope that's a relief to those of you who feel like all you have to bring to God in worship is blemished in one way or another.** If God is expecting unblemished worship from us today, then many of us feel like we have nothing to offer. That's why it's important to stress that the heart of the worshipper is in view.

- ❖ **And for the Israelites in Malachi's day, what their polluted worship exposed was their apathetic hearts.** They brought lame and mutilated animals as offerings because they didn't care anymore. They hadn't given up their religious duties, but it was all a bore. Listen to the LORD's accusation in v13, *"But you say, 'What a weariness this is,' and you snort at it, says the LORD of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering! Shall I accept that from your hand? says the LORD."*
 - **The worship of God had become a weary burden to them.** It was something to snort at. Something to thumb your nose at. Worship was boring because God had become boring. He no longer amazed them. The glory of his grace made them yawn.

- ❖ **Spiritual apathy had taken root in the hearts of these priests.** Who were so privileged. They alone among all the peoples and tribes of Israel had the great honor of serving the LORD in his courts. They were entrusted to guard the holiness of his altar and the purity of his worship. What a unique privilege and high honor!
 - **And yet these priests were bored with their job.** It had become a monotonous grind. Take the blood from this guy's sacrifice and throw it against the side of the altar. Then flay the offering and cut it in pieces. Then get the fire started and arrange the wood. Then arrange all the pieces, the head, and the fat and burn it all. And then do it all over for the next worshipper. It was a grind. They were just making a living. That's what spiritual apathy looked like for these priests.

- ❖ Friends, that begs the question: **What does spiritual apathy in worship look like for us?** Let me point to an obvious example that is particularly relevant as we continue to live under pandemic conditions. I should warn you that this could get uncomfortable, but remember – the uncomfortableness is a severe mercy. **Spiritual apathy in worship often manifests itself in a rather lax attitude towards the gathered worship of the church on the Lord's Day.**
 - Let me offer an illustration. Let's say, at your job, your boss calls for a weekly staff meeting where he expects everyone to be there. Could you imagine yourself consistently arriving 10 to 15 minutes late to every meeting or could you imagine missing a meeting practically every other week? You would never do that. Because you care too much about your job and what your boss thinks of you.
 - **But then what does that reveal if you consistently arrive late for worship service or if you're irregular in your attendance?** I'm afraid it reveals that you don't care about worship as much as you do your job. You're more worried about displeasing your boss than your Lord.

- ❖ **A lax attitude towards gathered worship on the Lord's Day – where it's not treated as a priority – is no different, at the heart level, than offering a blind animal to the LORD.** They're all signs of spiritual apathy – where you don't really care anymore.
 - And think about what takes place in a worship service. If you consistently grumble because the songs being led are not your favorite – or if the truth of God's Word or the glory of his gospel being proclaimed in the service no longer moves you – if you're just there going through the motions, then is that not similar, at the heart level, to offering a lame or sick sacrifice to the LORD?
 - **Romans 12:1 says that, in Christian worship, we bring ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to God.** So if we are the sacrifice, then what's going on in the heart can potentially pollutes our worship.

What Polluted Worship Embezzles From Our King

- ❖ So we've seen how polluted worship expresses what we really think about God and exposes what we really feel about him. The third lesson is to consider what polluted worship embezzles from our King. **This is important to stress because, without realizing the true offense of polluted worship, we might conclude that God is being too hard on us.** You might feel like I'm being too hard on you – making you feel bad for not tithing or for coming late to service or for skipping church altogether. Is this one of those sermons where the preacher is trying to guilt trip you into conforming to certain behaviors?
 - I understand how this is making you feel bad. But considering our text, I think you'd agree that that was Malachi's intent. **The tone of our text is that of rebuke.** Which fits the severity of the situation. Considering what polluted worship takes from God.
- ❖ This idea of embezzling God or robbing him will come up again in chapter 3:6 when Malachi directly addresses the OT tithe. **But even here in chapter 1, we see hints that the act of polluted worship takes something from God.**
 - In v14, the man who vows to the Lord a unblemished animal and yet swaps it out with a blemished one is called a cheat. He's cheating God out of something. And again, in the end, it's not the animal that concerns God. He owns the cattle on a thousand hills (Ps 50:10). He doesn't need more.
 - **What concerns God is the glory of his name.** Listen to the end of v14, *“For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.”* God's intent is for his name to be feared – revered and worshipped – among the nations. **But we cheat our great King – we steal from him – when we rob him of his due glory by our polluted worship.**
- ❖ **Look back at v11 and see why God was so fed up with Israel's polluted worship that he would rather they just shut the temple and stop offering cheap and unworthy sacrifices.** He was ultimately concerned with the message it was sending to the nations. *“For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the LORD of hosts.”*

- ❖ **God chose Israel – he set his love upon them before the foundation of the world – and called them to be his witnesses among the nations.** To be a city on a hill. To shine his light and proclaim his glory. To make his name great among the nations. **But if he is no longer great in their eyes – if he’s treated with less honor than a father and less respect than a master – then his chosen people are essentially stealing his glory and keeping it from the nations.** In that sense, polluted worship embezzles glory from our great King.

- ❖ And now this just makes you feel worse. **You already feel bad about how you’ve been worshipping the LORD in an unworthy manner, and now you’re told that you’ve been stealing from him as well.** Well, it’s not going to ease up in chapter 2. This is how you *should* feel by the end of Malachi 1 and 2.
 - But his original audience would have heard his entire prophecy in one sitting. They wouldn’t have stopped at chapter 2 and been left to feel deeply disturbed and depressed. So I don’t want to leave you in the same state. **Let me leave you instead with a word of hope found in the remainder of the book.**

- ❖ **Starting in Malachi 3, the tone of the book grows more hopeful as it looks to a future day when the LORD himself will suddenly come to his temple.** This is Malachi 3:1, *“Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts.”*
 - In our passage, the LORD is calling for the doors of the temple to be shut. His glory has been profaned, so it will no longer fill the temple. But all is not lost. **One day, God will send another messenger (like Malachi) who will prepare the way for the LORD himself.** Who will descend and suddenly come to his temple once again.
 - According to **Matthew 11:10-14**, that promise of a messenger would be fulfilled in John the Baptist, who prepared the way for Jesus of Nazareth, the LORD in the flesh. And when he came to the temple, the worship was still polluted. People were still cheating and stealing from God. He drove them out. But that just drove them to seek his death.

- ❖ **But that was Jesus’s plan all along – to offer himself as an unblemished sacrifice for the forgiveness of sins.** Through his death, the temple was purified and its purpose was fulfilled. And God’s glory was restored, and his name was made great among the nations.
 - **And like a refiner’s fire or a fuller’s soap (3:3), the sacrifice of Christ has a purifying effect on those who believe.** If the Word of God has convicted you and you realize you’ve been offering polluted worship – and if that has exposed an apathetic heart towards God – there is but one treatment.
 - **An apathetic heart is a cold and hardened heart, and it can only be warmed and softened by fire.** The refiner’s fire. Which is the love of Christ in the sacrifice of Christ for us. As we come to the end of chapter 1, recall how it started – with a strong affirmation of God’s love for us. Regularly preaching that love to your cold, apathetic heart is how you warm it for God.