

This morning is the first Sunday in Advent, a season that will lead us up to Christmas, and I am beginning a new sermon series this morning through the Old Testament book of Malachi. There are four chapters to this book, and so this will take us through the four Sundays leading up until Christmas. Before we dive into chapter 1, let me share three important details by way of background that will help you to get the most out of this book.

1) Malachi is a prophetic book

Whenever you read the Bible, it is important to read the book according to its genre. Is this book history, or a letter, or apocalyptic, or a gospel, or poetry, or, in the case of Malachi, is it a prophetic book? **What does it mean that Malachi is a book of prophecy?** Often when people hear the word prophecy, they immediately think about someone who predicts the future. But that was really not the main function of a Biblical prophet. **The Old Testament prophet was a covenant mediator.** What does that mean? Remember that when God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he led them to Mt. Sinai, where he made a covenant with the people. A covenant is like a contract, an agreement between two people or parties, but with greater intimacy. Think of a marriage covenant – in one sense it is a contract, in that two people are coming into agreement with each other about their relationship in a binding way before God and the government, but there is much greater intimacy in a marriage covenant than say an agreement between you and the Honda dealership when you buy a new car. Anyways, God made a covenant with Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, which was called the Mosaic covenant. I will be your God, and you will be my people. This is what it means to be my people – don't kill, don't steal, worship in these ways, care for the poor among you, and so on. And after these laws, or stipulations, would come the blessings and curses. If you follow these laws, you will experience blessings: prosperity, good crops, good health, peace, long life, and so on. If you disobey, you will bring upon yourself curses: famine, pestilence, plague, warfare, and so on.

So where does the covenant mediator prophet come in? Throughout Israel's history, they had a hard time following the laws of the Mosaic covenant. **And every time they were in danger of bringing upon themselves the curses of the covenant because of their disobedience, God would send a prophet, who would be God's mouthpiece to warn the people of their sins and to call them to repentance, to turn away from their sin and back to obedience.** In fact, the name Malachi translates as "my messenger." And so, you are going to find that this book, like most prophetic books, is very direct and confrontational in its style. It does not mince words or pull punches, but confronts Israel with its sins. It will make those

who hear it very uncomfortable with the way they are living. And if you are willing to listen to what God has to say through Malachi, I believe it will confront and challenge you as well.

2) Malachi lives and writes in the post-exilic age, around 450 BC

To locate this book historically, Israel had been conquered by the Babylonians and taken off into captivity in what is known as the exile. Under King Cyrus, they are allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem, which we read about in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra. As you might imagine, hopes were very high in Israel upon their return. They rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple, and expected that the promises of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah would come to pass, that the Messiah would come and there would be a time of peace and justice in the land. But it didn't happen that way, at least not as quickly as they expected, and the community fell back into sin, injustice, and spiritual complacency. And that's when Malachi shows up on the scene.

3) Malachi is the final OT prophet

After Malachi, God is silent for 450 years. Many events happen, but there is no word from God for a very long time, no prophet raised up to speak for Him, until finally Jesus and John the Baptist show up on the scene.

So now that you know the background of this book, why did I choose to preach on Malachi during this Advent season?

Advent is a time to prepare our hearts for the coming of Jesus, to look back at his first coming on Christmas, and to look ahead to his second coming, when he will return to put a final end to evil, to judge the world, and to inaugurate the new heavens and new earth. Often, we focus on the miracle that the God of the universe came near in the person of Jesus, as the eternal Son of God took on flesh and dwelt among us. But I think it is necessary to balance out the miracle of his imminence with a reminder of His transcendence, that the baby born to us on Christmas Day is not just a sweet cuddly baby, but is none other than the judge of all the earth, the one before whom we will all bow, the one to whom we will all give an account of how we have lived. And I believe the book of the prophet Malachi reminds us of that, holding the balance well between the holiness of our God and the mercy and grace that is also found in Him.

Let's begin by reading chapter 1. This prophetic book is organized around a series of disputes, where God begins with a claim or accusation, Israel disagrees or asks a question, and then God gives His response. There are three main messages that God communicates in chapter 1 of this prophecy:

1) I love you

Malachi 1:1 - 4:6 - *An oracle: The word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.* ² **"I have loved you,"** says the LORD. "But you ask, 'How have you loved us?' "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" the LORD says. "Yet I have loved Jacob, ³ but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his mountains into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals." ⁴ Edom may say, "Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins." But this is what the LORD Almighty says: "They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the LORD. ⁵ You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD-- even beyond the borders of Israel!'"

The prophecy begins in the first five verses with God declaring that despite everything wrong that Israel has done, He still loves them as His covenant people. He has been and will continue to be faithful to the Mosaic covenant as their God. In response, they question His love, revealing that they do not see the evidence of His love in their lives. In response to them, God reminds them of His covenant love shown to Jacob. Remember that Jacob was renamed Israel. God reminds them that He chose Jacob over Esau. He even says "Esau I have hated." Hate does not mean "despise" in this context but "love less" in the context. Think of **Luke 14:26**, where Jesus said, "If anyone comes to me and does not **hate** his father and **mother**, his wife and children, his brothers and sisters-- yes, even his own life-- he cannot be my disciple." Hate is a way of saying that my love for you is so strong, so paramount, that by comparison my affection for anyone else seems like hate.

God tells them, you are my people, and I will punish Edom for their immorality and for what they have done to you, which you read about in the prophet Obadiah.

Notice that even though God loves them, the people are suspicious, doubting God's love and faithfulness. **Maybe you understand where they are coming from.** After all, they were in exile, and even now, they are still under Persian rule. They are suffering from pests and plagues, and God has not yet fulfilled his promises of a Messiah and of a realm of peace and justice. They aren't seeing actual proof of His love, and so they are doubtful. But just because God is not giving them what

they want on their timetable does not change the fact that God loves them and will always be faithful to His promises.

2) You have not honored me

⁶ "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, **where is the honor due me?** If I am a master, **where is the respect due me?**" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. "But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' ⁷ "You place defiled food on my altar. "But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' "By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. ⁸ **When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?** Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" **says the LORD Almighty.** ⁹ "Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?"-- says the LORD Almighty. ¹⁰ "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands. ¹¹ **My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun.** In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty. ¹² "But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, **'It is contemptible.'** ¹³ And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," says the LORD Almighty. "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD. ¹⁴ "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations.

Listen closely, because this is where things get confrontational. God says to the Israelites and particularly to their priests that they are His son, and He is their father, but that they are not showing him respect or honor. When they question how, he points to their offerings of defiled food, blind animals, crippled and diseased sacrifices. They are not bringing God their first fruits, the best, but rather the leftovers, the scraps, and the parts of their flock that will not cost them much.

For those unfamiliar with the Old Testament sacrificial system, this is what was expected of them:

Leviticus 1:2-3 – “Speak to the Israelites and say to them: ‘When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD.’”

Leviticus 22:20-22 - Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf. ²¹ When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable. ²² Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as an offering made to the LORD by fire.

The expectation was that they would bring their best as an offering to God, but instead, they were bringing their leftovers, their scraps, the blind, injured, and maimed. I recognize that the idea of animal sacrifice seems foreign to many of us. Why does this matter? The people were continually sinning against God and against others, doing evil and polluting the land. The sacrificial system was provided by God as a way to atone for their sins, to deal with the evil in their midst. **They had to offer an animal from their own herd or flock, and it needed to be one without defect, because it needed to cost them something, so that they could understand the seriousness of their sin and recognize the graciousness of God’s provision of a substitute.** The animal would die in their place; his life for theirs, and the blood would help cleanse the land so that a holy God could remain with them. If that is the case, then what do you think would be communicated by offering a defective animal? Offering a maimed sacrifice communicates that the one giving does not comprehend the absolute perfection of God and the seriousness of their sin.

God continues by giving them an analogy – “try offering such pitiful animals to your governor!” Think about it. How would you treat a celebrity in your midst? What if Oprah Winfrey, or LeBron James, or someone else you admired were to show up to our church. What kind of respect, deference, and honor would you give to him or her? Would you not treat them with the utmost respect and do your best to treat them with honor? Why, God asks, do you show me less honor than that?

The bottom line is that their cheap offerings reflect their attitudes. And God tells them this:

¹⁰ *"Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands."*

In other words, God tells His people that He would prefer them to offer no worship at all than to give Him worthless worship. It would be better to close the temple than to open it up to this kind of dishonor.

So what about you? If you are willing to be honest with yourself, do you think that God might say the same to you today? Are you like the Israelites, not treating God with the honor and respect that He is due, but instead giving Him the leftovers, the scraps as an offering? Is He your priority in life, or is He an afterthought? Consider a few specific areas of your life:

What about your time? Do you offer Him priority in your day? Do you seek Him first, showing by your actions and your time that He is most important to you, that you belong to Him, that He is your strength, and that you want your life to bring Him honor? Recently I was counseling someone, and she was sharing about waking up and storming downstairs to deal with something she heard on the lower level of the house, and how she handled it poorly because of her anger. And I had a picture of Jesus, sitting by her bed, eager to meet with her in the morning and strengthen her by His Spirit for the challenges of the day, but she had chosen to push him aside to storm off downstairs in her anger.

So what about you? Is God the priority in your day? How many other apps and inputs do you turn to first before you turn to Him or to His Word? What does that reveal about your heart and what it desires or what it thinks about God? What would it look like if you opened up the Bible app on your phone first, or an actual Bible? Think about how easily we can sit through a two- or three-hour sporting event or concert, or watch hours of videos, and yet God is an afterthought, and how easily we can blame our busyness for our lack of attention to time with God. Do you wonder where God is and why you do not experience the reality and power of God in your life when you treat Him with such dishonor, offering Him your leftovers and scraps of your day?

What would it look like if you began your day in communication with Him before you began to interact with anyone else? What if your desire for Him was so paramount that by comparison, you hated everything else vying for your attention? What do you think He could do in your life if you honored Him with your time and made Him your priority?

And what about your talents? God has given you talents and abilities, gifts, and energy. Where are you using those? Are you using any of them in service to Him and to others? Or have you treated them like they are your own, to be used on yourself? What would it look like to not just use your gifts and talents on yourself but to use them in service to Him and to others?

And what about your treasure? Do you give Him your first fruits, the first of your earnings? Or are you concerned about everything else financially before you give to the Lord and to His church, only tithing or giving offerings if you have something left over? What would happen if you prioritized Him? What do you think would happen if you trusted that by putting Him first with your finances, that He would take care of you? Remember the widow in Luke 21:3, who put into the temple treasury all that she had to live on, and how Jesus honored her as an example of faith, because she was not just giving money but offering herself in dependence to her God?

What would it look like for you to believe the words of Jesus in Matthew 6:25-34.

Matthew 6:25-34 - *"Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes?"* ²⁶ *Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"* ²⁷ *Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?"* ²⁸ *"And why do you worry about clothes? See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin."* ²⁹ *Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these."* ³⁰ *If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith?"* ³¹ *So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'"* ³² *For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them."* ³³ *But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well."* ³⁴ *Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.*

In Malachi 1, God speaks through the prophet Malachi and tells the Israelites that they are dishonoring Him by offering Him their leftovers and scraps. So what about you? Are you prioritizing God, or are you offering Him your leftovers and

scraps as well, the diseased and blemished sacrifices, while keeping the best for yourself?

The third message from God to his people in Malachi 1 is this:

3) Even if you dishonor me, my name will be honored among the nations

⁵ *You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the LORD-- even beyond the borders of Israel!' ... ¹¹ My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty... For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations."*

God lets them know that even if they will not treat Him with honor, He will be honored among the nations. Remember that from the beginning, God did not choose Israel so that they alone would be blessed. They were to be a city on a hill, a light to the nations, bringing God's salvation to the whole world. Remember God's promise to Abraham:

Genesis 12:2-3 - *"I will make you into a great nation and I will bless you; I will make your name great, and you will be a blessing. ³ I will bless those who bless you, and whoever curses you I will curse; and all peoples on earth will be blessed through you."*

All peoples on earth will be blessed through you. In Malachi 1, God tells them that even if Israel fails to be that light to the nations, God will find a way to bring His salvation to the world.

Fast forward 450 years after Malachi. After 450 years of silence, Jesus comes on the scene, preaching about how the kingdom of heaven is near and healing people, giving a glimpse of God's perfect kingdom. He lives the perfect life that we could not live, and He dies a sacrificial death on the cross, as the one to whom all those animal sacrifices would ultimately point.

Hebrews 10:11-14 - *Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time he waits for his enemies to be*

made his footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.

Remember that in Malachi, God points back to the Mosaic covenant to remind them of His faithful love. But this side of the cross, we are no longer under that covenant, but have been offered a new covenant in Christ. The imperfect sacrificial system of animals that God provided for the Israelites in the Old Testament points us forward to a better offering, that God gave His only Son Jesus to die a once-for-all sacrificial death in our place, for our sins, to pay for our failure to give Him the offerings He deserve, for our failures to put Him first, for our self-centeredness and sin. We no longer need to sacrifice animals to remind us of our sin and to atone for them, but in Jesus, God has provided the once-for-all sacrifice for our sins, and as we trust in Him, we are forgiven.

And after His death, Jesus would rise again and tell His disciples to preach the gospel to the ends of the earth.

Matthew 28:18-20 - *Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. ¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age."*

Because of Jesus, because of the gospel, God's name will be great in all the earth. The new covenant is not just for the Israelites, but is for people from every nation.

And as we turn from our sins and put our faith in Jesus and His death on the cross for us, we are forgiven, adopted as His children, given His Holy Spirit, and promised eternal life. In the end, our motivation to honor God and make Him our priority is not because of some contract, or even because He is the creator. We honor God and prioritize Him when we come to understand what He did for us on the cross. When you truly understand what Jesus did, you see how He prioritized you, putting you above His own comfort so that you might be saved.

Romans 8:28-39 - *And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose. ²⁹ For those God foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the likeness of his Son, that he might be the firstborn among many brothers. ³⁰ And those he predestined, he also called; those he called, he also justified; those he justified, he also glorified. ³¹ What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against*

us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? ³³ Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. ³⁴ Who is he that condemns? Christ Jesus, who died-- more than that, who was raised to life-- is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. ³⁵ Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? ³⁶ As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long; we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered." ³⁷ No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. ³⁸ For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, ³⁹ neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

This is the God who loves you, who is for you, who is always working for good for you, and who will give you everything you need. Our motivation to honor and prioritize Him with our time, talent, and treasure comes when our hearts have been transformed by Jesus, who came on Christmas, who lived the perfect life we could not live, who died a sacrificial death on the cross in our place, who rose again from the dead to conquer sin and death, who is with us continually by His Holy Spirit, and who will return one day to take us to be with Him forever. He is always working for your good. He will give you everything that you need. Nothing can separate you from His love!

I encourage you to test him and see what will happen when you prioritize Him with your time, with your talent, and with your treasure. Test and see if He will not give you infinitely more than any app or input or purchase or pastime ever could.