

This morning is the second Sunday in Advent, a season that will lead us up to Christmas, and I am in the second week of my sermon series through the book of Malachi, the final book of the Old Testament. Malachi is a prophetic book, which means that as the people of Israel were falling away from faithfulness to God, that God raised up Malachi as a prophet, to be God's mouthpiece, to confront the people with their sins and call them to repent, to turn back to faithfulness to God. That means that you are going to find that this book, like most prophetic books, will be very direct and confrontational in its style. It is meant to make those who hear it very uncomfortable with the way they are living if their lives do not line up with God's design. And that means that if you are willing to listen to what God has to say through Malachi, I believe it will confront and challenge you as well.

In chapter 1, God's main message through his spokesperson Malachi to the people was that they were not honoring God, but were giving Him their leftovers, their scraps. They did not take his holiness seriously, nor did they take their sins seriously, and so they were bringing offerings to God that were not the best, not what God has required of them. If you missed last week's message, I would encourage you to listen to it, as I found chapter 1 very convicting and challenging in its call to give God priority with our time, talent, and treasure.

In chapter 2, God begins with a harsh word for the spiritual leaders in their community, and follows it with a confrontational word for the men in the community around the subject of marriage and divorce. Let me begin by reading verses 1-9, where Malachi records God's words to the spiritual leaders, and pay attention to what it is that He wants from them. You may not be a pastor or elder, but if you have any role of spiritual leadership over children or those younger in the faith, or expect to one day, take this to heart:

NIV Malachi 2:1-9 - "And now this admonition is for you, O priests. ² If you do not listen, and if you do not set your heart to honor my name," says the LORD Almighty, "I will send a curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not set your heart to honor me. ³ "Because of you I will rebuke your descendants; I will spread on your faces the offal from your festival sacrifices, and you will be carried off with it. ⁴ And you will know that I have sent you this admonition so that my covenant with Levi may continue," says the LORD Almighty. ⁵ "My covenant was with him, a covenant of life and peace, and I gave them to him; this called for reverence and he revered me and stood in awe of my name. ⁶ True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from sin. ⁷ "For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, and from

his mouth men should seek instruction-- because he is the messenger of the LORD Almighty. ⁸ But you have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi," says the LORD Almighty. ⁹ "So I have caused you to be despised and humiliated before all the people, because you have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law."

In these verses we read clearly that the priests, the spiritual leaders, are not living up to what God has called them to be or to do. **Listen to the phrases used that describe the role of the spiritual leader:**

Listen to God

Honor his name, set your heart to honor Him

Revere God and stand in awe of Him

Give true instruction to the people and nothing false

Walk with God in peace and uprightness

Turn people from sin

Preserve knowledge

Give instruction to those who are seeking

Be a messenger of the Lord

Basically, the role of the spiritual leader is to:

Walk humbly with God and live for His honor

Teach the people God's truth, calling them to turn from sin to faithful obedience.

They are not partial with God's Word, changing it to court popularity with the people. They are to walk with God and proclaim the Word. Love God's glory and love God's Word.

Now, it's not a 1:1 correlation between the Old Testament priests and the New Testament pastor or elders or spiritual leaders, but I can't argue with this job description. This is the standard to which you should hold me or anyone who calls himself or herself a spiritual leader. Walk humbly with God, and teach the people God's truth.

But look at what he says about the priests: You have not set your heart to honor me. You have turned from the way and by your teaching have caused many to stumble; you have violated the covenant with Levi. You have not followed my ways but have shown partiality in matters of the law. As a result, you are under

God's curse, under His judgment. I will spread offal – the remains of the sacrifices, the animal dung in the intestines – on your faces and cause you to be carried away with the sacrifices. I have caused you to be despised and humiliated.

Apparently, God takes it very seriously when those who are called to be spiritual leaders are not walking with Him, not honoring Him, and not teaching His truth. Maybe you can understand why James writes:

James 3:1 - Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly.

Spiritual leadership is a noble calling, but also a weighty responsibility. It requires people to walk humbly with God and live for His honor, and to teach the people God's truth, calling them to turn from sin to faithful obedience.

Malachi continues to give a word from God regarding marriage and divorce:

¹⁰ Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another? ¹¹ Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. ¹² As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob--even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty. ¹³ Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. ¹⁴ You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. ¹⁵ Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

So what is going on here? God confronts the people because it seems like there are some men who are divorcing their wives and marrying women who serve foreign gods. And God confronts them strongly, declaring "I hate divorce, and I hate a man's covering himself with violence." And twice he tells them: "So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith."

I do not plan this morning to do a thorough treatment of marriage and divorce, but I want to particularly focus on the phenomenon that God is speaking against here, which is individuals trading in their spouse for another. Whether you who are married, have been married, or desire to be married someday, the truth is that marriage is hard, and a lifetime of faithfulness is harder. The temptation still remains to trade in one's spouse for something you perceive as better: younger, better-looking, more respectful, more exciting, more loving. Sometimes it can take the form of divorce, sometimes affairs, sometimes pornography, sometimes fantasizing, sometimes flirtation. And I am not naïve. I know that I am speaking directly today to some people who are engaging in any or all of those activities. And we need God's help to have a marriage that honors Him and to be the kind of spouse who is faithful to both Him and to another person.

So why is it such a big deal to God that they are divorcing their wives and marrying women who serve foreign gods? Why not just let them do what they want with their marriage?

1) Trading in their wives for women who serve foreign gods is a clear sign of idolatry

Idolatry is worshiping something other than God. It is looking to something other than God to fulfill you, to give you life and joy and satisfaction. And this is exactly what they are doing by disregarding the will of God and trading in their wives for women who serve foreign gods. Remember that God has told them repeatedly not to engage in intermarriage with people who serve other gods:

Deuteronomy 7:3-4 - Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴ for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

But the people are doing what God has forbidden. They believe that whatever they will gain from obedience to God is not worth comparing to what they will gain by following their desires. And God responds that He will not bless that or receive their offerings. He says that they are spreading a cover of violence. You are not spreading a garment of love but of violence, acting unfaithfully towards your spouse. To spread a garment is a metaphor for covering another person with your love.

Ezekiel 16:8 - 'Later I passed by, and when I looked at you and saw that you were old enough for love, I spread the corner of my garment over you and covered your nakedness. I gave you my solemn oath and entered into a covenant with you, declares the Sovereign LORD, and you became mine.

But they are covering their wives with violence instead.

While this is thousands of years ago, some things never change. Marriage is hard, and a lifetime of faithfulness is harder. The temptation still remains to trade in one's spouse for something you perceive as better: younger, better-looking, more respectful, more exciting, more loving. Sometimes it can take the form of divorce, sometimes affairs, sometimes pornography, sometimes fantasizing, sometimes flirtation. **It's the age-old belief that God will not fulfill you or give you life and joy and satisfaction the way that another man or woman could.** After all, if you only live once, why spend your life unhappy when there might be someone better out there? Why not trade up if you have the chance? But God's attitude towards that type of mindset and behavior has not changed. His good plan has always been that some would be called to a life of singleness, pursuing Him wholeheartedly, while some men and women would be called to a life of faithful marriage. And just saying "that's wrong" might restrain your actions, but laws alone give no real power to obey. **So how do you combat the desire to trade up and stay faithful in marriage?**

In Malachi 2:10, God accuses the people of profaning the covenant by breaking faith with one another. **Remember that the covenant is more than a contract; it is a relationship of intimacy** between God and His people, between God and us. The more that you understand the relationship between God and marriage, the more I believe that you will find the power to stay faithful to your spouse, and ultimately to God. Let's do a quick tour through what the Bible has to say about marriage.

The big picture of marriage begins in Genesis 2, where God creates humanity male and female and says in **Genesis 2:24 - For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh.**

Throughout the Old Testament, God uses marriage imagery to illustrate His relationship with His people, and uses the language of spiritual adultery when He talks about our sin. In other words, sin is not just rule-breaking; it is loving anything more than we love God.

In the New Testament, we find that the ultimate purpose of marriage is not just companionship or having children; marriage is meant to point to the relationship between Jesus and His people, the church. We read about this in **Ephesians 5:21-33**, where tells wives to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ, and husbands should love their wives as Christ loved the church and laid down His life for her. The way a husband and wife love and serve each other in Christian marriage is meant to be a sign pointing people to Jesus' love for His people, a picture of God's love for us.

***Ephesians 5:31-32** - "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh." ³² This is a profound mystery-- but I am talking about Christ and the church.*

And then, Jesus tells us in Matthew 22 that when we finally are with Jesus, marriage and sex will disappear and no longer be needed. We no longer need the sign, because we have the real thing. In Matthew 22, a group of religious leaders called the Sadducees, who did not believe in life after death, ask Jesus a question in hopes of exposing how ridiculous views on the afterlife are. Jesus replies with:

²⁹ Jesus replied, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures or the power of God. ³⁰ At the resurrection people will neither marry nor be given in marriage; they will be like the angels in heaven.

Notice how Jesus responds. In heaven, there will be no marriage. There will be no sex. They will not be necessary, because there will be something better. **Jesus responds by saying that if you think there is marriage in heaven, you don't understand the Scriptures or the power of God – you don't realize that there is something greater in store**, that marriage and sex are but shadows of the real thing, the love we will have with God. They are but signs pointing to the oneness we will enjoy with love and beauty Himself. If you are married, you and your wife will no longer be husband and wife in heaven; the long-lost reunion with your departed spouse that is so popular in culture may not be exactly as you envision in your head when you arrive in heaven. Not that you won't be reunited, but Jesus is saying that the joy of marital oneness that you experience on earth will be nothing compared to what you will be experiencing in eternity with God.

Sure enough, the Bible ends with marriage imagery:

***Revelation 21:1-5** - Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the*

Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband. ³ And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, "Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. ⁴ He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away." ⁵ He who was seated on the throne said, "I am making everything new!" Then he said, "Write this down, for these words are trustworthy and true."

The Bible uses wedding language to describe heaven because is the best language we have on earth to communicate the depth of love, commitment, joy, security, and ecstasy that is found in a relationship with God, both now and eternally. **Out of all the possible imagery that could have been used to describe heaven, God chose a wedding, the beginning of an eternal union.** By using this language, the writer of Revelation is communicating that eternity will be the perfect union between God and his people, where we enter into His eternal love, security, and joy forever.

Why does this matter? If you want to be faithful, you need to consider earthly marriage in the light of the big picture of marriage. After all, if this life is all there is, and if romantic love is the highest of all possible loves, then why not trade in your spouse for a better model if you are not happy or if you have the chance? Why not flirt, have affairs, engage in pornography, or leave them if you have the chance? But if this life is not all there is, if earthly marriage is an imperfect sign pointing to the real thing, a relationship meant to point people to the love between God and His people, then you know that no human being can complete and fulfill you. You will not expect your spouse to be your savior, to fulfill you, but you will understand that Jesus is your ultimate love that your heart has been searching for. **Marriage is a shadow, a temporary institution that will fade away when we have the real thing forever. In the meantime, the thing that will bring Him the most honor is not trading in one spouse for another, but being faithful to God in the situation in which you find yourself, learning to love when it's hard, to suffer well, to show grace, to speak the truth in love, and in the process become more like Jesus.**

If you find in yourself a longing for something other than faithfulness to God and your spouse, what you are really longing for is not another person, but for God. Consider what C.S. Lewis said:

The books or the music in which we thought the beauty was located will betray us if we trust to them; it was not in them, it only came through them, and what came

through them was longing. These things – the beauty, the memory of our own past – are good images of what we really desire; but if they are mistaken for the thing itself, they turn into dumb idols, breaking the hearts of their worshippers. For they are not the thing itself; they are only the scent of a flower we have not found, the echo of a tune we have not heard, news from a country we have never visited.

When you understand the covenant you have with God, the love you will possess forever, then you have the power to be faithful to God and to your spouse in whatever circumstance you find yourself, for in Christ you already have the love that you are seeking, and you will enjoy it to the fullest forever.

2) Marriage is a covenant before God, not simply a contract

It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. ¹⁵ Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his.

We do not just have a covenant with God, but marriage is also a covenant. When a man and a woman come together in marriage, it is not just a social contract like you have with your phone company, so that if one party is unhappy with the service being provided, they can just break the contract and find another phone company. Marriage is a covenant that involves making vows before God. This is why we say, “what God has joined together, let no one separate.” This is why you first make vows to God and then to each other. You vow to God that for better or worse you will be faithful to the other person as long as you both shall live, and then you promise those things to the other person. Marriage is a covenant, and God has a say in it. It’s not just an agreement that can be broken because something better comes along.

In v. 14, God says that He hates divorce. Please here that clearly. He does not say that He hates divorced people. God’s good plan from the beginning was for marriage to be a good thing, a relationship of love and companionship that points people to Him. He hates divorce because of what divorce does to people and what it does to the picture it gives people of God. But God does not divorce the divorcee.

Even though God hates divorce, yes, there will be times, Biblically speaking, when divorce is the only option, or when the decision is out of your control. Even Jesus said that when a partner breaks the marriage covenant through sexual immorality,

you are freed from it. And certainly in cases of abuse or addiction, there may be times that the most loving thing you can do to is to separate from a spouse. But the motive is love, and the goal is reconciliation. In the end, though, marriage is a covenant, and we do all we can to bring maximum glory to God, with divorce as a last resort. Love, grace, forgiveness, suffering well – all of those bring glory to God and can make us more like Jesus.

3) The decision to divorce has generational implications

¹⁵ Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

It is for godly offspring. In other words, the decision to divorce is not just about you and your personal happiness. The decision is a generational decision that can impact generations. There are no guarantees that our children will end up believers, but God's design was for a man and a woman to provide a godly home in which their children can experience the love of Christ.

So what is Malachi's response? Twice he writes, "Guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith."

I believe that guarding yourself in your spirit is the same as not allowing your heart to grow hard. Divorce is only possible if one or both spouses allows their heart to harden and not remain tender towards the other person and towards God. Watch out for hard-heartedness. Remember what Jesus said:

Matthew 19:3-9 *Some Pharisees came to him to test him. They asked, "Is it lawful for a man to divorce his wife for any and every reason?" ⁴ "Haven't you read," he replied, "that at the beginning the Creator 'made them male and female,' ⁵ and said, 'For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become one flesh'? ⁶ So they are no longer two, but one. Therefore what God has joined together, let man not separate." ⁷ "Why then," they asked, "did Moses command that a man give his wife a certificate of divorce and send her away?" ⁸ Jesus replied, "Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning. ⁹ I tell you that anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, and marries another woman commits adultery."*

If you're asking "How do I get out of this marriage?" your heart is dangerously hard. God can change your heart and your relationship. If your heart is tender towards God and each other, God can do anything.

Guard your spirit. Do not let your hearts grow hard. And do not break faith. In Christ, God has been faithful to you, loving and saving you when you did not deserve it, when you were faithless to Him, when you were an enemy to Him. And as you understand that covenant of love that He has with you, that you will enjoy forever, that will eclipse even the best earthly marriage, you will find the power and motivation to be tender hearted, faithful, and loving to your spouse. Be faithful to God in whatever circumstance you find yourself, for in Christ you already have the love that you are seeking, and you will enjoy it to the fullest forever. As Jonathan Edwards put it:

"God is the highest good of the reasonable creature, and the enjoyment of him is the only happiness with which our souls can be satisfied. To go to heaven fully to enjoy God, is infinitely better than the most pleasant accommodations here. Fathers and mothers, husbands, wives, children, or the company of earthly friends, are but shadows. But the enjoyment of God is the substance. These are but scattered beams, but God is the sun. These are but streams, but God is the fountain. These are but drops, but God is the ocean."