

Serving God the Leftovers?

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[0 : 00] Please grab your Bibles, have them open at our passage in Malachi. It will really help, especially this week, I think, if you have that passage open and you can follow along, and see what's going on. Isn't it great that we're not defined by exams? Whether we're doing them or not doing them, whether we succeed or fail in them, we're defined by the fact that we're made in God's image, loved by him, that we are made for a unique purpose, to walk a unique path that only we can walk with his power and help. That's what defines us, isn't it? We know that. We can go into exams and say, thank you, God, for giving me in advance what I need to fulfil my purpose by your love. That's an amazing thing, isn't it? I've started thinking this week that maybe grown-ups need movement breaks, just like kids. So, have a movement break. If you feel the need, say hi to the person next to you, if you'd like to. If you don't want to be spoken to, just go like this. Okay? That's fine.

. Right.

Right. Do carry on those conversations after we finish this afternoon. If you feel a need of a continuous movement break, you can always chat while walking around the building in big circles. There is that option. So I hope at Bethel we're not afraid of the difficult questions. Here's a question. What did you think of the reading? Good. Thank you.

[2 : 35] I'm glad. It's God's word. So that is good. But it needs to be said, doesn't it? We have a commitment to all of God's word at Bethel. We have that commitment because Jesus had that commitment.

Jesus believed that all of God's word, Old Testament and new, was from God to us for our good. And so that's why we look at passages, even ones like this, where you think, oh, I'm not sure what's going on here.

Much rather be back in last week, wouldn't we, where James was showing us the Lord, reasoning with his people, reminding them, I have loved you. Malachi chapter 1, verses 1 to 5.

Not because we're good, but because he is. And the greatest evidence of that, choosing us to be part of his kingdom through the saving work of Jesus.

That was last week, wasn't it? That kind of raises the question, why do they need convincing? Do you ever find yourself going through the motions? I do.

[3 : 38] I have. Let's be honest, we've all done it, haven't we? Going through the motions at home, at work, at church. Maybe, more than we want to admit, really.

Just seems impossible to be wholehearted, to be totally present, everything we're doing, all the time. Doesn't it? You'd have to be some kind of superhuman.

Divine, maybe. Look, in Malachi's time, things looked fine on the outside. God had brought them back from exile. Temple is rebuilt.

The priests, doing their thing. The sacrificial system, is in place. Someone from the royal house of David, is in charge. So what's the problem? They're going through the motions.

The problem is, the hearts of the people inside, all of those institutions, those structures, those programs. And God points out that problem, and what the solution is, in two cycles, in our passage, this morning.

[4 : 49] And the short message is this, really. Serving God the leftovers, says something about your heart. And we'll discover that, as we look at this prophecy.

In this prophecy, we have a question, from God. A charge, from God. A warning, from God. And a promise, from God. God's question is this, why aren't you loving me, as you should?

Our response, as human beings, to being loved, like God loves us, adopted, forgiven, as a minimum, that should be, we honour God, don't we?

There's some degree, of gratitude, in our hearts, towards him. Even your boss, who makes sure, your wages get paid, even he or she, deserves respect, even if you don't like them.

But that's exactly, what God's people, were not giving. Let's look at verse 6. A son honours his father, and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honour due to me?

[6 : 02] If I am a master, where is the respect due to me? Says the Lord. Almighty. And as usual, the rock starts at the top, doesn't it?

Keep reading. It is you priests, who show contempt, for my name. But we're not off the hook, just because God's talking, to the priests here, because of course, the New Testament says, we're all priests, ministering to each other, God's love, and truth, in our family, even if yes, some have, a different, maybe representative role, on top of us.

So that, is for all of us, this message. Think about real life, the real life that's being pointed to here. Would you give your boss, or your client, a shoddy report?

Or a half-baked plan? If mum and dad are in the nursing home, should we treat visiting them, like an inconvenience? We're all teenagers once, some teenagers among us.

Should we be giving our parents, a dirty look, while we're doing the job, they asked us to do?

You've heard me say, lots of times from the front here, that it is okay, to be in church, and be tired, right?

[7 : 18] Sometimes it's just all we can do, to be here, full stop. On the other hand, there's also a time to ask, are we being respectful, to the Lord of the universe, if we fall asleep, almost every time?

We think, I'll never treat God like that. Then along comes Jesus, and he tells the story, of the prodigal son, and we realise, we all do that. That's the human problem.

Remember that story, the story of the prodigal son? The son goes to the father, and he says, Father, yes he calls him Father, because the outward respect, is there, isn't it? Father, give me my share, of the estate.

In other words, Dad, thanks for the stuff, bye. And then there's the older son, who outwardly, does everything asked of him, doesn't he? But inwardly, he really thinks, well I've been such a good boy, that I deserve, everything that's coming.

That's the human problem, in a nutshell. We don't love God, as we should. As we should love someone, who says, I have loved you first. We can't help ourselves, because we're human.

[8 : 28] So we end up serving God, the leftovers, as we see. Let's look at verse 7. End of verse 6 maybe.

But you ask, how have we shown contempt, for your name, verse 7, by offering defiled food, on my altar. But you ask, how have we defiled you?

By saying that the Lord's table, is contemptible. In verse 8, when you offer blind animals, for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice, lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? And then if you flick forward, into the second cycle, verse 13, about halfway down, when you bring injured, lame or diseased animals, and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them, from your hand?

But what's the big deal? It seems a bit far away, from us doesn't it? Every Israelite hearing this, would have known, that the big deal is, that God has specifically said, that he is worth, the best.

[9 : 35] That any animal, with a defect, is not a sacrifice, which reflects, God's weight, his glory, his worthiness, his holiness. It does not reflect, who he is, or what he has done.

So if you were to turn, to Leviticus 22, the ceremonial and sacrificial law, in verse 20, you'd read this, do not bring anything, with a defect, because it will not be accepted, on your behalf.

And humanity, has been doing that, since the beginning, haven't they? Cain, Abel, where the trouble, all starts, remember their sacrifices, one was the first fruits, the best, that could be offered to God, and the other, the leftovers.

The problem is, not on the outside though. It's not just bad form, it's not that we're not, praying right, or singing right, okay, that's not, what's going on here, and this is God's charge.

You have not given me, your hearts. How do we know that? Verse 7, How have we defiled you, by saying, that the Lord's table, is contemptible, and then the second cycle, verse 12, but you profane the Lord's table, by saying, the Lord's table is defiled, and his food is contemptible, and you say,

what a burden, and you sniff at it, contemptuously, says the Lord God Almighty.

[11 : 01] Now what isn't happening, is people aren't wandering around, in ancient Israel, saying, the Lord's table, pretty contemptible, right? They're not openly, wandering around saying that, that's going on inside their hearts, inside their hearts, they're thinking, what a burden, do we have to keep doing this?

What a chore, what a drag, what a bore, to have to go, to God's house, it's so, it's so twee, and the songs are so clunky, and the sermons, well they're more John Major, than John Piper.

And so we begin to despise, it in our hearts, that, is the scandal, that is the charge, that God is making, what should we give, to a father, who loves us, and chooses this church, our whole hearts, that's what we should give him, except we don't, and do you know what, the sad thing is, even this side of the cross, there are people like that, Ananias and Sapphira, in Acts, it's the same story, isn't it?

And so we come thinking, well, you know, whatever's left, after the kids rugby, and ballet, and after I've watched the match, and after I've had my day of golf, and after I've done the admin, that kind of leaked, into Sunday, and when I've paid my subscriptions, well then whatever's left over, you can have that, God.

The leftovers, isn't that what we give God, when we turn up to church, completely frazzled, from the night before? When Sunday becomes the thing, we have to do, between the fun of Saturday, and the business of making money, on Monday.

[12 : 49] Isn't that what we begrudgingly do, when we join yet another rota? Do you know, I'm really thankful, that Bethel by and large, is not like that. Praise God for that.

And thank you. But it remains a danger, doesn't it? As long as we have human hearts. It could be. It'd be so easy, wouldn't it, to hear this, as a call, for excellence.

Don't give God, anything that isn't flawless, because he won't accept it. That's not what's going on here. God is diagnosing the heart. God is worth, the most precious thing, you can give him.

That isn't your time, or your money, or your effort, it's your heart. That's what God wants. Any birthdays this week?

Yeah, I've got, I'm getting a nod. Have we had some birthdays, in the house this week? Birthdays, you get birthday cards, don't you? Some at least. And then some cards are like this, they're kind of, they arrive, and they're obviously, they've been pre-printed, and automatically posted, online generated, and they have a kind of a, you know, general, happy birthday, hope you don't fall in a hole, on your birthday.

[14 : 14] And you're like, great, thanks. And then you get the kind of, painstakingly, hand drawn, slightly squiggly, felt tip coloured in, cards, with a message on the inside, that you can just about read, that is the product, of a loving heart.

Which one do you want? There's no question, is it? That's what's going on here. God doesn't want, your picture perfect, pre-printed card. He wants your heart.

And that is what, the Israelites, were not, giving him. If you don't believe me, flick to 2 Corinthians, chapter 8, verse 12, where it says, for if the willingness is there, the gift is acceptable, according to what one has, not according to what one does not have.

The flip side of that, is of course, that you can be, giving and doing, and sacrificing all you like, but if it's not coming from here, God says, just stop. Stop. Just stop.

I won't bless it, because I want you, not your stuff. And then there is God's warning, which we started to think about.

[15 : 43] I will not accept this. Back to verse 8. Try offering them, such gifts to your governor.

Would he be pleased with you? Answer, no. Would he accept you? Answer, no. Verse 13.

When you bring injured, lame, or diseased animals, and offer them as a sacrifice, should I accept them from your hands? Answer, no. Sometimes we can come thinking like this.

Right, so I've come to church, I've given God my tithe, I've done my thing, and now we're okay, aren't we? Now, now we're good.

I'm good with God, right? He'll be gracious to me. Do we honestly think that God will accept us, if we come offering him a deal, like that? He's worth more than your Sunday morning, and your 10%, isn't he?

[16 : 41] Anything less than your whole heart, will not be accepted by God. Some of us have known that for a very long time. Praise God.

And we just need the reminder from time to time. Some of us need to hear this today. There is no fence to sit on. Okay? You are welcome here, in the name of the Lord Jesus.

But in the end, it's your all, or nothing. And when we think about what the table and the altar signifies, that becomes much clearer, doesn't it?

So the table and the altar is where the offering was laid, in the Old Testament. What's the only altar in the New Testament, reflected in the communion table? It's the cross.

Isn't it? The cross of Christ's sacrifice. So those who come offering God less than their all, are showing contempt for the cross on which Christ offered his all.

[17 : 46] Not as a bargain, a swap, but as an undeserved mercy. It gets more difficult.

Not only will God not accept things in place of people, but if that is the attitude to his altar, to the cross, he will do more. Let's read verse 10. Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar.

Father, I am not pleased with you, says the Lord Almighty, and I will accept no offering from your hands. Just shut the doors and put out the fires, because they're useless.

They may look great, they are not producing any light, they are not producing any heat, they are just busy work. And for the individual who knows that they should give their heart, but tries to fob God off with something less, having no temple, no table, no altar, no cross, means there is sadly only one thing left.

Verse 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.

[19 : 09] How can we apply this to ourselves? Well, God is talking to the priest, isn't he? But we've just said, he doesn't take his eyes off us, when he's talking about the priest, because we all love to follow a personality, don't we?

An influencer who can sing something sweet and easy to us in three minutes. Love that, don't we? And there are absolutely leaders today, like those priests back then, who pay lip service to God, join his name to any cause, drop his name to get applause, that kind of thing.

Leaders who name and claim Christian values, but who have not given God their heart, who are not looking for forgiveness, who are not seeking personal transformation, we have them here, and we have them abroad, don't we?

Here's the warning for us, don't make them your hope. Don't parrot their soundbites, don't jump on their bandwagon, because we've seen where that ends up.

This week's been pretty clear, hasn't it? And we see now, what God says, because he says to those sorts of priests, I will not accept you. Worse still, perhaps there are churches who are not interested in worshipping the way God asks them to worship in the Bible, just like Israel were not.

[20 : 38] Who do not focus on the brokenness of the human heart, and the gospel heart of Jesus Christ. There's lots of busy work, but their fires are useless. Don't go there, because God will shut the doors.

This picture's a broken relationship, doesn't it? Between God and his people. Now God isn't throwing his people back into exile again, with this message, is he? But all is not well.

There is a breach caused by this disrespectful, disinterested heart attitude. There's a real problem here. Especially for those of us who have never given God our hearts in the first place.

How is that curse going to be lifted? How are the hearts going to be won? God's promise. I will bring about heart worship among all nations.

Let's look at verse 11. My name will be great among the nations. From where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place, incense and pure offerings will be brought to me.

[21 : 46] Because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty. And then towards the end of verse 14. For I am a great king, second cycle, says the Lord Almighty. And my name is to be feared, will be feared, among the nations.

One of the commentators says that we see in Malachi the final chord of the old covenant. And the first chimes of the new. Which means that we have the same old problem that humanity has always had.

Which is the human heart. We will always need reminding and renewing right up to the end. We've got that. But we also have this vision of the solution. And what the future will look like with that solution.

And that is God saying, ordaining, commanding, bringing about worship from the heart. Transforming people so that they see, through his Holy Spirit, how much God is really worth. How does he do that? I've referred to it earlier. He does that by bringing a perfect, spotless, faultless, flawless, unblemished, lamb.

[22 : 58] And sacrificing that lamb. In fulfillment of all of the requirements of the law. Making up for all of the times that we have failed to be wholehearted. And the name of that lamb, Jesus.

The lamb who takes away the sin of the world. And so what God wants from us now is not perfect offerings.

Flawless music. No stumbles when you're reading. Perfect sermons. We weren't getting those anyway. No, he wants what he's always wanted.

Right? He wants your heart. He wants to be king of your heart. And that failure, the failure that we see in this passage, and our failure, because we do fail, don't we?

That does not mean that God's relationship with us, with his people, will just fizzle out. No. People being disinterested and tick box in the way that they do church or whatever it is.

[24 : 06] That's just part of the big problem that God has solved in Jesus. It has always been there. Turn to John, chapter 4, verse 23.

This is Jesus speaking to a woman who has come to him knowing that she has not been wholehearted in the way that she has loved him. In verse 23, what does Jesus say?

Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and in truth. For they are the kind of worshippers that the Father seeks.

That comes true when Jesus comes. When he sacrifices himself on the cross. When God, therefore, is able to dwell in people who are not wholehearted by his spirit and show them his true glory and help us to respond in the way that he wants.

So instead of the fire being useless and burning out in some small corner of the Persian Empire with a group of ethnic Jews, God lights that fire in our hearts, his own fire, and he spreads that fire across the world.

[25 : 29] Which is exactly the story of the church, isn't it? I'm carrying on today. Because Jesus now stands in the gap, the Lord will never reject his people and that breach is healed. But, but, that doesn't remove the rightness of worshipping God as his glory deserves.

It's the opposite, isn't it? Now that we see Jesus, isn't it even clearer that God deserves our whole hearts? That his glory deserves that?

God will never disown the children he has adopted. But I think also it needs to be said that he will not bless a half-hearted offering from his children.

Serving God, the leftovers, still says something about our hearts, doesn't it? It's really this. Jesus offering for us, for our sin was perfect.

It's done, it's satisfied. So now we're to give him our whole hearts in return. Can I just create some space to reflect on that?

[26 : 47] Two things to think about. One is this, can you think of a time when you know you have been half-hearted? Maybe that's now, maybe things have just gone stale for you. How did you get there?

What was happening in your heart? Good to think about that, isn't it? But next to that, think of the perfect sacrifice of Jesus in which he offers his whole heart to his Father and who says to us, I have loved you.

How will you let the Holy Spirit use that truth to warm your heart to God this week? So here are those two questions. Sorry about the small font.

Just take a couple of minutes to pray and think about that and then I'll close in prayer. Thank you. Thank you.

Thank you.

[28 : 54] Thank you.

It satisfies your glory and frees us from sin. Please fill us with your Holy Spirit so that we can love you and serve you wholeheartedly this week.

In Jesus' name, Amen.