

Searching for a Faithful Heart

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[0 : 0 0] Well, good morning everyone. Take a deep breath. I don't know whether you notice, as you come round that roundabout at the Shepherd and Flock, and you're heading back up towards Upper Hale here, there's that firm, isn't there, called Borns, and quite often they have a kind of witty slogan on the wall there to encourage you to buy their sheds. And I was really struck last week actually, and it did make me smile I have to say, and it said this, it said, once more into the shed dear friends, once more into the shed. Yeah, well that's obviously a misquote from Shakespeare, isn't it, and Henry the 5th was it, when the king rallied his troops and they needed to charge through this breach in the defences of some castle in France, I think called Honfleur Castle or something like that. But if you're tasked with defending a medieval castle, you need to know that your walls are thick enough to prevent a breach, and that the enemy can't then charge through, and that you have your guards set up on, or posted up on the watch tower to warn of an approaching enemy.

Somebody on stag, as I think they say in the army. Well, a couple of weeks ago, we were in Tipperary, and I have to say it is a long way. And while we were there, we were looking out for some ancient ancestors of mine, and where they came from and so on, Irish connections. But we went to a place called Caia Castle, I think I'm saying that right, Bridget, Caia, yeah, Caia Castle. And in 1599, they thought their walls were absolutely impregnable, they were incredibly thick, and they thought no one's going to get through here. But there was an enemy approaching, and they got these new cannons, and after they battered the walls for about three days, eventually they made a breach in the wall, and they all piled through and took the castle. So it wasn't as impregnable as they thought.

Well, that's a good picture, isn't it, of the human heart. As Christians, we have an enemy that is out to exploit a breach in our defences. And if we're not on high alert and looking out for the danger, our hearts can be overcome by temptation or a sin, perhaps, that a wrongdoing, that we're especially susceptible to, and it can go on to actually ruin our lives.

Peter reminds us in the New Testament, in 1 Peter 5, that he says this, he said, Be alert and of sober mind. This is to Christians. Your enemy, the devil, prowls around like a roaring lion, looking for someone to devour. So if we give in to temptation and sin, it'll deeply affect our relationship, not only with God, which is the most important thing, but also in our relationship with others. And in our passage this morning that Rachel read for us, God twice tells his people, through Malachi, in verse 15 and 16, so be on your guard and do not be unfaithful.

And that's the main message for this morning. It may be a bit unpalatable, but it's one we've got to deal with, and it's good for us. Are we protecting our hearts and our lives from unfaithfulness God and each other?

[4 : 1 1] When we were looking at Haggai a few weeks back, we saw that God's blessing was poured out on his people. Remember that God loves his people passionately, and after they'd repented of feathering their own nests and building their own houses and ignoring the temple, they recommitted themselves to the rebuilding of the temple. Remember that? And now it's completed.

To a hundred years on, this is when Malachi issues his prophecies, complacency had set in, big time. They thought they were doing okay, and like all these people, they were heading off to the temple to perform all their sacrifices and all the things that they were supposed to do under the law of Moses, which is what they lived by. But Malachi saw that their heart just wasn't in it.

Their love for God had grown cold. Despite all this blessing that he poured out on them in Haggai's day and the years after that.

And as we heard last week, even the priests were condemned for not teaching God's instructions faithfully. And instead they were leading the people astray. And as we heard again last week, they were belittling God's deep love for them.

And not giving him the respect and the honour that was due to him. And God was deeply offended. And this is the unpalatable bit really, isn't it, for us.

[5 : 50] So his blessing was turned into a curse. But they shouldn't have been surprised. In the Old Testament, we have to understand that God's covenant, his agreement with his people from the time of Abraham and from the time of Moses, was being broken by them.

They were breaking his covenant. They were not keeping to their side of the bargain. And this was the deal that God gave to his people in those days. When he gave Moses the law, they were to live by.

This is what he says. See, I am setting before you today a blessing and a curse. The blessing if you obey the commands of the Lord your God that I'm giving you today. The curse if you disobey the commands of the Lord your God.

And turn from the way that I command you today. By following other gods. And we need to understand, don't we, that God is jealous. He's jealous for the love and the affection of his chosen people.

And he'll do whatever it takes to bring them back to himself. And this is how the Old Testament laws worked. And we need to ask ourselves this question.

[6 : 58] How faithful am I? Chapter 2, which we've been reading. God has rebuked the priests earlier on. We saw that last week.

And now he turns his attention to the people. And Malachi reminds them that they are all one family. There are people chosen by God. And they're descended from Abraham and his offering.

They all come from the same root. Do we not all have one father, says Malachi? Did not one God create us? But something had gone badly wrong. So he asked the question, why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors?

This agreement with God. By being unfaithful to one another. Somehow the people were breaking God's covenant. And of course God's covenant, God's agreement with them, was for their own good.

If they were obedient to what he was saying. And it was a sign of his special love for them. But what was it that they were up to that had upset God so much?

[8 : 04] The problem was that they settled back into life in Jerusalem and in Israel. However, they started marrying women from neighbouring tribes who worshipped other gods.

And it appears that they were even divorcing their Jewish wives. They used to be betrothed and get married early in their lives. But they were divorcing these wives in order to marry these much more attractive women, it seems, from other nationalities.

You see that in verse 14. And it wasn't so much that these ladies were foreign. So we've got to be very careful about that. They weren't being nationalistic or anything like that.

You may remember Boaz, for example. Do you remember Boaz? Married the Moabitess called Ruth. Who was an ancestor of Jesus himself. So it's not so much the fact that they were marrying people like the Moabites.

It was a bit more serious than that. The problem was that they were bringing their idol worship into the temple. They weren't keeping themselves reserved entirely and wholeheartedly towards God.

[9 : 10] And these people that they were marrying were going into the temple as well and worshipping their gods, the Baals, as they were in those days. Being drawn away from a relationship with the true God.

In verse 15. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. The children were being brought up. Not only were they being, in a sense, taken away by these other gods, but their children were being encouraged to do that too.

And worship idols and being drawn away from a relationship with the true God. The accusation was that they were being unfaithful, therefore. Not only to their former wives, but also to God himself by breaking the covenant that he made with them.

And we know that intermarriage was expressly forbidden by God at that time. God's chosen people. You can see all about that in Deuteronomy.

So what was happening here was that their defensive walls of faithfulness to their God had been breached. And they were being spiritually compromised. So what can we learn from this today?

[10 : 25] You say, well that was a long time ago. It doesn't matter, does it? I think it does. And we need to ask this question ourselves. How faithful am I? Particularly if we're Christians here this

morning.

How faithful am I towards God and to others? Especially those in close relationship with me. I have to say there's something very beautiful, isn't there, about a faithful marriage.

Do you find that? I was talking to one of our neighbours down in Bethel Lane today. And he was telling us that he's lost his wife a year or so ago. But he's been married to her for 60 years.

Can you believe that? And you want to applaud that and say, how did they do that? How did they manage that? Being faithful all those years. So we applaud that, don't we?

And it's actually what God, our Creator, has always intended for us. And our children, in order that they might flourish. To feel secure. To be brought up in a secure relationship between husband and wife.

[11 : 31] And it is really tragic. And I know that may affect some of you here. It's really tragic when relationships fall apart. And it causes hurt and pain to all involved.

And not least the children themselves. But as Christians, we know that the Bible often draws a parallel between a strong, faithful marriage.

And the relationship between Christ and his church. His bride, the church. And Jesus is the perfectly faithful bridegroom.

He's always faithful. But we need to ask ourselves, when we think that he, and we'll be considering communion later on. He loves us so much that he even died for us.

But the question for us is, how faithful am I being towards him as the other partner in this relationship? You know, are there passions in our lives that come before him?

[12 : 32] In our love and our devotion? Perhaps we're being too influenced by the culture around us. The moral standards of the people that we live among.

Especially in relationships. It doesn't really matter. You don't have to get married. You can do whatever you like and do what's good for you. And you take out of relationships what you can get. Is that right?

Is that good? If we love him and are faithful to him, we will also love our partners. And be faithful to them. The two go together.

Can I just say this to some of our younger folk, perhaps? And I say this through personal experience, really. If you consider entering into a close relationship with someone, it's so important. If you're a Christian, it's so important for your future happiness that you find someone who shares your love for Jesus. Isn't that true? So that you can worship and serve him together in your lives.

[13 : 45] I know when my wife, Alice, and I got married, we considered getting married. We thought of this, what was termed in those days, the triangle of love. So you have Jesus at the top of the triangle and each of you at the bottom.

So like a triangle of love. And we both, praise the Lord, we both had come to put our faith and trust in Jesus when we got married. And so that is a really stable way to develop a relationship, this triangle of love.

And it's great, isn't it? Because if things start going wrong or you're put under huge pressure in your relationship or things aren't going the way you want them to do, rather than take it out on each other, you go to your heavenly father and you sort it out with him.

And you're both going to the same throne of grace. And that takes the pressure off your relationship. So it's something to think about, isn't it, really?

This triangle of love, it's a good thing. There's something else here. Did you notice how Malachi quotes the Lord himself when he says, in the passage we've read, he's talking himself to the people from what he's learned from the Lord.

[15 : 02] But this is the Lord himself speaking in verse 16. And this is something I just wanted to emphasize briefly. This is what he says. The man who hates and divorces wife does violence towards the one he should protect.

So what's that all about? Let that be a warning to all of us. Us men that are in a marriage. Never to abuse our partners physically, emotionally or spiritually.

And unfortunately, even in the church this can happen. God will hold us to account. That's something that God has particularly outlined here. We are not to abuse the partners that we have. We're to love and protect our partners as Christ loves and protect his church. And as a church we must support and protect all those that have been or are even now in abusive relationships.

We must protect such people. We must support them. And we must help where we can and give them the love that they need. And yes, there will be situations, I'm sure, where divorce is unavoidable because of the unfaithfulness or even the extreme abuse of one of the partners.

[16:22] But this is only in extreme situations. And Jesus himself gives guidelines on this in the New Testament in Matthew. And another quite sensitive note, I guess, I know that there are believers here in our fellowship who don't have believing partners.

But Paul is clear in Corinthians, in his letter to the Corinthians, that by remaining faithful and a good partner in your marriage, God can use that faithfulness to bring your loved one into a relationship with him.

And may that be the case so that you're united in your love and service for Jesus. Well, there's another point here that we really need to open up from what Malachi is teaching.

Something else the people that were really guilty of was shedding crocodile tears. Verse 13, if you have a look at that. Another thing you do, you flood the Lord's altar with tears.

Crocodile tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favour on your offerings or accept them with pleasure from your hands. And on the surface, it would seem that when they came to offer their sacrifices in the temple, they'd be showing genuine repentance for their sins by putting on an open show of grief.

[17:51] But God saw through all their wailing. Their grief was not because of a realisation that they were breaking any of God's laws or commandments, but because God was withholding his blessing from them.

And they sensed it. And they were suffering as a result. It was a kind of self-pity because things weren't going towards their plans and what they wanted. And they were indignant.

Verse 14, you ask why? Why are you not blessing me, God? And Malachi says, it's because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth.

You've been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant. So they were doing this and they were just brushing it aside, really, and going in and doing all the sacrifices, thinking that God would bless them for it.

He said, hang on a minute. Do you realise what you've been doing before me? They were coming to worship and not seeking forgiveness for what they were doing wrong, or they'd done wrong in the past, seeking atonement and forgiveness.

[19:01] They just thought they could do the sacrifices and then God would bless them. Well, once again, what can we learn from this in this day and age? If we're honest, we can be very good, can't we?

And I speak from personal experience here. We can be very good at making excuses for things we think or do that we know are wrong. We try and justify ourselves and do all we can to cover things up and then wonder why God doesn't accept our worship and we feel distanced from him and separated from him.

Have you ever felt like that? Something's gone wrong in your life and you've felt a bit separated from him. As in Malachi's day, it may be sexual immorality or something like that.

If you're married, we need to ask ourselves, are you getting too close emotionally to a work colleague? It's getting beyond just a friendship?

Are you being tempted to go online and look at pornography? That's a big issue today, isn't it? Even in the church. Sad to say. Or it may be that some personal passion is taking over your life.

[20:12] Rather indulge in that rather than spending time with your partner or in quiet times with your heavenly father. It may even be a tendency to fly off the handle at every little grievance shown by your life partner.

Making things miserable for them. These things are an indication that at some point we have just let down our guard and the defences of our heart and our affections have been breached.

Like in that castle we were talking about earlier. The enemy, we just remind ourselves that we have an enemy who's wanting to trip us up and lead us into all sorts of things.

He wants to get a foothold in our lives. And even as believers, we can be subject to this. And if we don't do anything about it, this can take over more and more of our lives and things can get even worse.

You know, something that's just a temptation can work into an action and then all kinds of things can happen. People are hurt. God withdraws his love.

[21 : 23] It can cause immense pain and damage, can't it? And Malachi's warning, doesn't it? It rings down through the ages. Be on your guard. Be on your guard. Well, you say, how can I be on my guard against unfaithfulness in whatever form it takes?

How can we protect ourselves and be faithful to God and to others that are close to us? We just need to remember that Malachi was the last of God's prophets in the Old Testament.

God has sent prophet after prophet because of this human condition of always wandering away from him, getting involved in things that we shouldn't get involved in. And time and time again, he called his people back into a relationship with them, as we saw in Haggai.

And they kept wandering off, sometimes deliberately, into all kinds of unfaithfulness and sinful practices. And if left to their own devices, time and time again, they were incapable, it seems, of keeping God's laws to enable them to be blessed and to flourish.

[22 : 40] And that's our problem too, isn't it? We can just keep drifting away. We can go into a cycle where we are obedient and we're blessed and then we can trip up again.

Something just gets hold of us again and we can trip up. But praise God, he has a better plan. He had a better plan in mind, not just for the Israelites, but for you and me today.

And this is the good news this morning. There was silence for 400 years after Malachi, before Jesus himself came. God sent his own son into the world.

The prophets had kept coming back, coming back, coming back, to try and draw people back to God and it hadn't really worked. So God sent his own precious son into the world to solve the problem that the law on itself, it just couldn't solve.

His purpose was to rescue, to rescue people, you and me, from the curse of sin and empower them to love and serve him wholeheartedly. This is the good news of the gospel.

[23 : 58] It's an amazing thing. We saw last week how God rained down curses on those that willfully broke his law and we all shuddered. At least I did.

The only way human beings could be released from this curse was through the sacrifice of a perfect substitute. We needed a substitute.

I need a substitute. You need a substitute. Someone who was perfect in all they did, that kept the law in every respect. Someone that God could say, this is my beloved son in whom I am well pleased.

The only way human beings can be released from this curse was through the sacrifice of this perfect substitute that kept every aspect of the law. Jesus' son sent us to suffer our punishment on the cross and take away the curse on God of you and me.

And you can see as Jesus hung there on the cross, what was he doing? He was receiving the curse that you and I should have received for all those things that we've done wrong if we're honest with ourselves.

[25 : 04] The law condemns us but Jesus saves us and he sets us free. What an amazing gospel. Sets us free from its curse if we put our trust in him.

Galatians 3, Paul describes it like this. He says, for all who rely on the works of the law are under a curse. As it's written, cursed is everyone who does not continue to do everything written in the book of the law.

And none of us can do that, can we? None of us can do it. Everything written in the book of the law of God, the Ten Commandments and so on. And he goes on to say, Christ redeemed us from this curse of the law by becoming a curse for us.

He took it on, took on that curse. He redeemed us in order that the blessing given to Abraham might come to the Gentiles, that's you and me, through Christ Jesus, so that by faith, not by what we do, by obeying the law, but by faith, we might receive the promise of the Spirit who gives us the power then to resist all temptation.

So what do we do now? All that's needed now is to put our faith in Jesus. And if there's anyone here who's never done that before, can I urge you before it's too late to do it?

[26 : 25] Just put your faith in Jesus. Don't try and be good. Yes, you will be encouraged to do good, but you can't plead God by just obeying the law. But what you can do is put your faith in Jesus, who is the faithful one.

You can trust totally in God's amazing grace for you and his love. Receives the power of the Holy Spirit. When we put our faith and trust in Jesus, he enters us by his Spirit.

His Holy Spirit dwells within us and gives us the power to resist all temptation, to live new lives of faithfulness to God and to others. We need to trust in Jesus' faithfulness, not our own, which will fail.

But, as we see, Malachi urges us to be on our guard, not to be unfaithful. So the only way we can be truly faithful is to rely when we're tempted, and we all are, aren't we?

We're all tempted at different times and in different ways. When we are tempted, we get on our knees and pray for the protection of the Spirit. We've sung about him being the great defender.

[27 : 35] He is the defender of our souls. Flee into the impregnable fortress of God's love and grace. If you've been tempted or fallen into sin, go to Jesus now.

We're coming up to communion. Just go to him, confess your sins, and receive his grace and his love in your heart, and be empowered to do what's right in future.

Just ask your heavenly Father to forgive you. Pray urgently for the healing power of the Holy Spirit to overcome it. That's why Jesus came.

That's why he came to save you and me. Praise his name. And let's go to communion now. Thank you.