

When Grace is Absent

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[0 : 00] Turn with me to Malachi chapter 1, Malachi chapter 1, page 960.

For me, goats live in the mountains, are covered with shaggy hair, and aren't human friendly. If before you ever have my family and I to your house for a meal, you were to ask me, is there anything you don't eat?

Probably respond, yeah, goat. A number of years ago, we were very privileged to visit Kenya. And on the Sunday, lead worship in a vibrant congregation not far away from where Alice is from.

And after worship, we went for lunch to the home of one of the elders. When we arrived at his house, the meat was roasting on a fire. And I asked the elder's wife, what meat is that?

To which she replied, goat. Well, I hope I hid it very well from my hostess, but inside I felt just sick to the bone. She went on to say, my husband is a very poor man.

[1 : 20] He only has two goats. He considers it such a privilege to show hospitality to you and your family today that he has slaughtered one of them for you. In an instant, I went from feeling sick on the inside to feeling incredibly guilty.

That I should be so ungrateful even though this delightful godly man had given up so much for me. I learned a lesson that day.

This godly elder and his wife taught me about the heart of a joyful giver. That man and his wife gave all they had because their hearts were in it.

And because their hearts were in it, they gave all they had. The problem God is dealing with here in these verses isn't altogether unrelated, but this time in a bad way.

Let me remind you that Malachi, along with Haggai and Zechariah, is writing around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah's return from Babylon. By that stage, the temple in Jerusalem has been rebuilt and the services of sacrifice at the temple have been resumed.

[2 : 34] But the people's heart just wasn't in it. Last week, we learned that they had conveniently chosen to forget that God loved them. This week, we learned that the sacrifices they're offering to the Lord are blind and lame and sick.

They were supposed to give their best to God. The purest and most costly of the flock, but they're giving substandard animals. It costs them nothing to give. It is the priests in particular God is addressing in these verses.

They are meant to lead, both by word and example, God's people. But in verse 8, we learn that they are bringing blind, crippled, and diseased animals for sacrifice.

They wouldn't offer them to the governor of Judea. So why offer them to God? More than that even, as we learn from verse 13, they consider the cost of serving God a weariness.

And they sniff at it contemptuously. Far from the attitude of that godly Kenyan elder and his wife who joyfully gave all he had for the priests, serving God was a burden, a weariness.

[3 : 52] They're saying, must we? Rather than, can we? What's the problem? With arrow-like perception, God speaks to his people through the prophet Malachi.

He will speak. They will listen. The presenting problem might be that their offerings are substandard, and that they are being disobedient by not offering the best of their flock to God.

But the central problem is that their hearts aren't in it. The heart of the problem of the people of Malachi's day is the problem of the heart of the people of Malachi's day.

The reason they are offering substandard sacrifices, and by so doing, polluting God's table, is because their hearts aren't right with God.

Well, very interesting, you say to me. All very interesting. But frankly, what does this do with me in 21st century Scotland? These problems surely belong only in 4th century BC Israel.

[5 : 07] Well, really, is this just as true as we think? Let me ask us all a question, a challenging, offensive question. When was the last time you gave your best to God?

Let's think of all we are and all we have. When was the last time we gave something that really cost us to God?

I'm not asking when the last time we gave something, or even something that we might have considered to be enough. I'm solidly asking, when was the last time we gave the best of our time, money, and talents to God?

The question, you see, is one of the state of our hearts before God, rather than our outward actions. And what these verses are telling us in Malachi 1, is that the heart of a Christian's devotion, is the devotion of a Christian's heart.

The heart of a Christian's devotion, is the devotion of a Christian's heart. In the same way, Jesus, with arrow-like perception, preached the Sermon on the Mount, a sermon in which he describes how it's the state of a man's heart before God, which is of primary importance.

[6 : 26] Could it be that these verses in Malachi are far more relevant to us today than we might like to think? Could it be that this is a problem which belongs not only in 4th century BC Israel, but in every age?

It is so hard for us to ask ourselves that question.

Am I offering to God that which costs me nothing to give? Am I offering to God that which costs me nothing to give? It's a question no one else could answer for you.

Only you could answer it before God. If that's true, that the heart of a Christian's devotion is the devotion of a Christian's heart, then how is my heart today?

What's it costing me really to put sin and death, to put sin to death in my life and to pursue radical holiness? What's it costing me to pursue grace, to grow closer to God in my day-to-day reading of his word and in prayer?

[7 : 42] What's it costing me to serve God by serving his people? Well, perhaps in the light of Malachi's arrow-like perception, if you're anything like me, you begin to hang your head in shame.

Because having taken a long, hard look at ourselves, we realize we have an awful lot to confess before God. That we're like these priests whom God accuses of defiling him.

Because rather than give God our best, we've so often given him what's left over after we've had the best. And it's all because our hearts aren't right with him.

That godly Kenyan elder gave me a goat. What is it really costing us to be Christians today? In the words of verse 10, if we're not going to offer God, if we're going to offer things to God which cost us nothing to give, then God says to us, I'm not pleased with you.

I'm not going to accept the offerings from your hands. If you're going to offer God something which costs you nothing to give, God says, don't bother. My intention this evening, though, is never to crush us with guilt, but to draw us to repentance and new commitment.

[9 : 06] It is not to push us to doing something against our will, but to lovingly draw us into the joyful heart of a giver. It's our hearts which need to be right before God. Not only then, only then shall what we give him be acceptable in terms of a holy life of devotion and service.

These verses make really sober reading, but as I say, they're not there to crush us with guilt, but to draw us to repentance, a new commitment to Christ.

What needs to change, it's not an outward behavior, it's our hearts. After this lengthy introduction, to pull us into the joyful heart of a giver, to draw us to repentance, to draw us to rely upon God's grace in a new way, from these verses, I want to present you very briefly with four powerful motives why we want to plead with God to give us new hearts.

Hearts not of stone, but of flesh. Hearts filled not with self, but with him. Remember, the devotion of a Christian's heart, sorry, the heart of a Christian's devotion is the devotion of a Christian's heart.

So let me offer you the following four motives from this passage, which I pray will bring us to repentance of heart and a new commitment to God and his grace. First, who God is.

[10 : 33] Second, how God relates to us. Third, what God has done. Fourth, what God will do. First, who God is.

Who God is. On seven occasions in this short passage, God calls himself the Lord Almighty. It's the Lord Almighty who is speaking through the prophet Malachi to his people.

That particular name of God is literally the Lord of hosts. And as a reference to two aspects of who God is, both of which remind us that he is not to be toyed with.

God is to be taken very seriously indeed. In the first place, the title the Lord Almighty reminds us of God's infinite power.

God's infinite power. In verse 8, he speaks of the governors of Israel, men who received taxation offerings of Israel's peoples. These men are representatives of the mighty Persian Empire.

[11 : 44] If they're not satisfied with what someone is offering to them, it's a very serious matter. You don't really want to get on the wrong side of Xerxes, emperor of Persia.

They hold power in Israel. And so, people must ensure that they offer them their best. But these governors are but dust of the scales compared to God.

And compared to him, their power is weakness. What do we think? That the men who reign over Israel and receive taxation from Israel's peoples control the armies of heaven, the millions upon millions of mighty angels?

No, of course they don't. God does. And he is and of himself the Lord Almighty. The Lord is like Aslan. From the Narnia tales, he's good.

But he's not safe. He deserves first place in our hearts because of his power. But in the second place, the title Lord Almighty, the Lord of hosts, remind us not just of God's power, but also of his passion.

[13 : 08] His passion. He's the Lord, which when it's presented to us in small capital letters is his personal name. The God who was steadfastly committed in love to his people by forming Israel into a nation in the first place.

by returning them from exile in Babylon. The governors of Israel, these Persian puppets, the servants of Xerxes, they don't really care for the people over whom they rule.

They care only for what these people can give them. Power and prestige and status. And yet, the people give them their very best. But the Lord Almighty, who is infinitely committed in steadfast love to his people, receives from his people that which has costed them nothing to give.

There's something surely not right here. Surely, as a function of how he has put them first in his heart, that God has put his people first in his heart, his people should put God first in their hearts.

We'll come to this in a little while, but if the people of Israel were central to the loving purposes of God for the whole world, then surely he deserved first place in their hearts.

[14 : 33] Who is God? He is not a cosmic plaything. not someone we can take for granted, either in his power or his passion.

I wonder whether in our hearts we have belittled God. Has our God been too small, as the book says?

If our vision of God is small, then it's no surprise that our devotion to God is small. Remember who it is who's calling us to offer him the best in terms of our time, money, and talents.

It's not an earthly ruler who is simply just a wee bit bigger than we are. It's the Lord Almighty, the God of power and of passion.

Who God is. Second reason that God deserves our very best is how God relates to us. You know, this is really one of the most remarkable passages in the Old Testament, picturing as it does the two relationships we enjoy as God's people with him.

[15 : 51] A son to his father, a servant to his master. Who says that the God of the Old Testament is not intimate? Because in this passage, even as he presents himself to us as the Lord Almighty, he also tells us that he's our father and our master.

That we're his sons and his servants. The problem with the people of Malachi's day is that they relate to God in neither of these ways.

They don't give him the honor he is due as father nor the respect he is due as master. And of course that's a problem of the heart, isn't it? Spiritual half-heartedness springs from a heart which does not relate to God as father and master.

It is no coincidence that in his Sermon on the Mount, Jesus, describing the heart of a Christian's devotion, the most common word he uses for God is the word father.

It is only as we correctly understand our relationship to God that we shall be able to truly serve him from the heart and give him the best we have. If, as a result of this evening's study, that you're realizing that you're only giving God things which cost you nothing to give him, the problem resolves down into this, you're simply not living in the fatherhood and lordship of God.

[17 : 33] Because if we ain't off honoring God with the very best of our time and our money and our talents, it's a sign perhaps that we're not living as his children.

If we're not respecting God with the best we have, could it be that we don't understand what it means to live under his lordship? The priests in Malachi's day should have understood these things better than anyone.

After all, they spend their lives around the things of God and yet they're blind because they neither understood that God had devoted, they did not understand that God they had devoted their lives to.

Because if they had, they would have never offered him that which cost them nothing to give. Listen to me carefully, this is the most important challenge of this passage.

A heart understanding of what it means to live under the fatherhood and lordship of God. That's the central point. A heart understanding of what it means to live under the fatherhood and lordship of God.

[18 : 42] It's not a sinister thing. To live with God as father is liberating. To live with God as lord is freeing. What could be better than knowing God never leads us into harm because he loves us as a father.

A heart understanding of what it means to live under the fatherhood and lordship of God. The heart of Christian devotion is the devotion of the Christian heart. It's here in black and white.

It's in our heart the battle is fought and won. Third. Third reason we need to give God our best. What God has done.

What God has done. You'll see through these verses that God is condemning the priests because they're offering to him that which costs them nothing to give. Weak, sickly animals. When really they should be offering him the very best they can give.

And I can hear the kickback because I wrote this sermon and I kicked back against this. When I was writing it. Why should I give God my very best? I understand that he's the Lord Almighty and I get the point that he's father and lord.

[19 : 58] But what has he done to warrant my giving of my best for him? Okay. Seems like a fair question to ask. We'll keep our money in our pockets.

We'll keep our talents in our quiver. We'll keep our time to our own diary. After all, God doesn't want us to burn out in his service, right? God will always be happy with our second best or what I can give him without it hurting me.

But you know, this passage in Malachi with its call for us to give God our very best reminds us powerfully of something which had not yet happened in Malachi's day but something which would happen very soon after.

For in about 350 years time after Malachi wrote these words, God would give his very best to the sinful people of Israel. Not his second best, his best.

He sent his son, Jesus Christ, who having lived a perfectly righteous and lovingly passionate life, will offer himself as the sacrifice for our sin. God so loved us that he gave his best for us.

[21 : 12] When my children were tiny, same size as little Lily Nelson, I would sing them a children's song. I'm special because God has loved me and he gave the best thing that he had to save me.

His own son, Jesus, crucified to take the blame for all the bad things I had done. My kids probably don't remember that but I used to sing it to you when you were tiny.

God gave the very best to those whose hearts were very far from him. God gave the very best to those whose hearts were tight-fisted.

When Jesus is crying out in agony on the cross, we want to ask ourselves the question, how much did it cost God to give his one and only son for us?

Did it cost God nothing to give Jesus for us? Or did it cost him everything? I rather think that by way of response to this question, we can do no better than sing those beautiful words where the whole realm of nature mine, such an offering were far too small.

[22 : 28] Love so amazing, so divine, demands my life, my soul, my all. And this also helps us to learn how to fix the problem of spiritual half-heartedness, which is where the real problem in these verses lies.

The solution is the cross. It always is. The solution to a lukewarm heart which pollutes God by offering him that which costs us nothing to give.

The solution to that is a fresh appreciation of all God has done for us by giving his very best on the cross for us. Paul says in Romans 12, therefore I urge you, in view of God's mercies, offer your bodies as living sacrifices to him.

In other words, fill your heart with Jesus Christ. Christ. And it won't be long before the joy of our hearts will overflow into the giving of a goat for a stranger.

The fourth reason, the final reason why we are to give our best for God is what God will do. What God will do. Twice in this passage, God reveals what the future shall hold for the worship of his name.

[23 : 52] In verse 11, God says, 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 because my name will be great among the nations.

Then in verse 14, For I am a great king, says the Lord Almighty, and my name is to be feared among the nations. In these verses, God's casting our eyes hundreds and hundreds of years into the future.

Well, as far as Malachi was concerned anyway, to the days when the gospel would expand beyond the borders of Israel and Gentiles would become God's people by faith in him.

God's name and gospel will be great. God's glory will be praised. The name of Jesus will be confessed as Savior and Lord.

Men and women from every nation under heaven will bow their knees before him and offer the best they can. They will become God's children and servants.

[25 : 01] They will be the beneficiaries of God's grace toward them given in his son on the cross. God here is prophesying the worldwide expansion of his church and the universal acknowledgement of Jesus Christ as Lord.

Lord. The descendants of those to whom Malachi is writing will crucify Jesus. They will reject Jesus.

They will curse Jesus. But in his resurrection, Jesus shall be declared Lord of all with heavenly power and glory. Fill your heart with that image of the world wide glory of God and his purposes for the future.

Then on that day the knowledge of God shall cover the earth even as the waters cover the deep. There shall be a new heavens and a new earth where righteousness shall dwell and Jesus himself shall be our shepherd.

Well, here's the question. If God's name is to be great among the nations, should it not be first great among us, his children, his church? When I was a boy, my father would get me to help him carrying wood down from the forest, sawing it up ready for the fire.

[26 : 27] Sometimes as a teenager, my mind would be on other things. And rather than carrying the logs on my shoulders, I'd barely lift a twig to help my dad.

And at times like that, he would turn round to me and angrily say, come on, Maloon, put your heart and soul into it. Come on, Maloon, put your heart and soul into it.

That Kenyan elder and his wife put their heart and soul into it. Because he gave up for me, an ungrateful me, one of his two goats.

Let me close with that question. A question we're asking again in light of these four great motives. Who God is, how God relates to us, what God has done for us, and what God will do.

How's our heart before him? How much does Christ and his grace really mean to us? How much is the gospel really transforming us? Let's stop offering God what costs us nothing to give.

[27 : 35] Rather, in the light of how he has given us his very best. From the heart, let's give him ours. Yes, even our faith and even our trust in Jesus.

Let us pray. Lord, we thank you that the message of scripture is one. And whether in Old or New Testaments, you're calling your people to give their very best to you, because you have given your very best for us.

And you're calling upon people who are ungrateful and tight-fisted, sinful and transgressors, by grace to be transformed, to pursue holiness, to pursue love, and to pursue Christ-like devotion.

Lord, we pray for any who are here this evening, who do not yet know Jesus as Savior and Lord, who are not yet your children. And Lord, we ask that in light of what they've heard this evening about how you have given your very best, Jesus on the cross, that they would give their hearts to you, that they would acknowledge with their mouths, Jesus Christ as Lord.

We ask these things in Jesus' name. Amen.