

God's living, loving relationship with his people

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[0 : 00] Hi everyone. I'm just reading Malachi chapter 1, the whole thing, 1 to 14. The Oracle of the Word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi.

I have loved you, says the Lord, but you say, how have you loved us? Is not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated.

I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to the jackals of the desert. If Edom says we are shattered, but we will rebuild the ruins, the Lord of hosts says, they may rebuild, but I will tear down, and they will be called the wicked country, and the people with whom the Lord is angry forever.

Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. A son honours his father, and a servant his master.

If then I am a father, where is my honour? And if I am a master, where is my fear? Says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name.

[1 : 08] But you say, how have we despised your name? By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, how have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised.

When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor.

Will he accept you or show favour? Says the Lord of hosts. And now entreat the favour of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favour to any of you?

Says the Lord of hosts. Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain. I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts.

And I will not accept an offering from your hand. For the rising of the sun to its setting, from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations.

[2 : 08] And in every place incense will be offered to my name, and a pure offering. For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food, may be despised.

But you say, what a weariness this is, and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence, or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering.

Shall I accept that from your hand, says the Lord? Lord, cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock, and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great king, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.

Three simple words. I love you. I love you.

They're probably, I think, the words we crave most to hear. They're simple words, as I said, yet they declare a really complex relationship.

[3 : 25] Relationship. A relationship of personal delight. A valuing. Acceptance. Long-term commitment. Three simple words, and yet they're also very confronting words.

They are so powerfully emotional in the context of a relationship. They're actually so outrageous in their claim.

And they're also so challenging in the responsibilities they infer. And they're three simple words which will always bring a response.

Always. That response might vary. It might be a shallow response. So we might actually, like so many people, just say love you as the way to start or end an interaction with somebody.

And it's just a sort of warm, fuzzy thing that doesn't really show any awareness of the actual state of the relationship. Or the responsibilities involved in it.

[4 : 35] Just love you. Love you. It's a very common way of speaking in our society. Or it could be self-affirmation. We actually could think when somebody says, I love you, well, no surprise there

because I'm very lovable.

And I deserve to hear those words spoken to me. And others, I can understand, are very keen to get into my friendship circle. Or we can respond with suspicion.

We hear the words, but we don't feel there's any practical evidence of those words being real. We might even suspect their motivation.

That is, we might think somebody's playing with the notion of love to get something else from us. Or we can meet them with belief and acceptance. That is, hearing the words in and of itself is an incentive to value the relationship even more.

It defines and describes the relationship and makes us want to long for even a greater love, a deeper relationship. And we commit practically to growing that relationship.

[5 : 47] But as I said, one thing is clear. In response to the words, I love you, we will have a response in our hearts. And that response will become obvious through our actions towards the person who expressed their love for us and to us.

And that's what connects us into God's message to his people through Malachi. There's 55 verses in Malachi. And 47 of those verses are God speaking directly to his people.

God speaking and uncovering the hidden thoughts and attitudes and responses in the hearts of his people.

And so God is saying, I love you to his people. And then the balance of what's been said in here is God uncovering their response to that statement of his love and that experience of his love.

So in a sense, the whole of Malachi is about God saying what he thinks about what his people think of him.

[6 : 54] And that's what makes it very, very confronting. Because God shines a torch into our heart attitudes. And it's not just confronting because of that, but it's confronting, I think, if you're going to be like me, because the attitudes that are exposed are all too familiar, all too common.

In response to God's statement, I love you. Well, let's jump into the text then with the first heading. The love affirms, the Lord affirms his active commitment to his people. When he says, the opening lines, I have loved you.

I have loved you. Now, the final words before a period of being apart are always important. They're always passionate.

Because those words are the words that will sustain the relationship until renewed communication. And it's just so in this oracle through Malachi.

These are the last direct words the Lord says to his people for more than 400 years. The next words are actually through John the Baptist and the arrival of Jesus.

[8 : 08] And so it's not surprising, therefore, that for a period of separation, God closes down by saying, I have loved you. That's what he wants his people to take away with him.

And remind themselves of on a daily basis. And so they're warm. They're rich. They're relational words. They're expressing God's heart for and his commitment to his people.

The perfect tense, I have loved you, highlights a consistent and unwavering love, which has begun some point in the past and continues into an undefined time in the future.

These three words describe, or actually four words, these words describe the reality of the Lord's relationship with his people since, go all the way back to Abraham, when God covenanted with his people to love them and bless them.

That's more than a thousand years earlier. But then, as Matt and Grace brought out, verse 6, they are also confronting words.

[9 : 24] The context is God saying, I have loved you, but then there's something else happening behind the scenes. Look at verse 6. I just feel the heartbrokenness, as it were, of God as Father.

A son honors his father and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor?

And remember, in ancient Near Eastern language and culture, not to honor is to bring shame upon.

If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master or a king, where is my fear or respect, says the Lord of hosts? See, that says the Lord of hosts.

It's confronting in its awfulness. God has loved his people generously and consistently, but they have responded with careless indifference, suspicion, and even contempt, as some of the other verses suggest.

[10 : 42] And if I can say this, the Lord here presents as a broken-hearted father, expressing something of the pain and hurt of having children refuse to recognize or accept his love.

But the thing is, you see, for God, this isn't new. 200 years earlier, at the start of the prophet Isaiah's oracle, it was introduced in almost the same way, almost the same words.

This rejection of God's love is not just a flash in the pan. This is a deep-seated attitude of God's people.

And we see it coming out in these verses. Their immediate response, as God sort of develops this conversation with himself, but picking up, answering for his people, because he can see the attitudes of their heart.

Their response, how have you loved us? It's a response that brings shame, not honor, to the Lord.

[11:50] God makes his people squirm, facing the reality of horrible, sinful attitudes that lie deep within them, by nailing them on their actions, which are the direct result of those hidden attitudes.

Look at verse 2. God's people fail to believe God and take him at his word. Now, this is the Lord of hosts, the Lord of the universe, the covenant God saying to his people, I have loved you.

By virtue of his own authority and his own character, God's people should just have believed that.

That was the Lord's public, covenanted promise, stated repeatedly to generation after generation of his people, that he would love and bless his covenant people, Israel.

But instead of tears of appreciation, instead of thankfulness and a joyful, loving embrace, their response is really cutting and dismissive.

Hmm. Well, that's a very interesting thought, Lord. Can you just give me a little bit more information? How exactly have you loved us? Their accusation ignored the hard evidence of history as well as the repeated public statements of the Lord.

[13:14] The hard evidence of history that the Lord then is forced to defend and reiterate here in verses 3 onwards, 3 through 4 and 5. Look at history, the Lord's saying.

I've demonstrated practically the nature and extent of my love for my covenant people. Against all normal expectations, against all traditions, God covenanted to love and bless Jacob's descendants, not Esau's.

Their status and history as God's special loved people was entirely due to this fact that God graciously committed himself to loving them as opposed to Edom's line or Esau's line.

And the difference is, Jacob's line was blessed and enjoyed the constant blessing and favor of the Lord. Edom's line enjoyed the constant anger and condemnation and judgment of the Lord.

The two statuses couldn't be any more different. What explains the difference? God's love. And yet God's people seemed to be oblivious to it and allowed their immediate circumstances and feelings to dismiss all this carelessly and thoughtlessly.

[14:34] How did that happen? Well, probably because they had particular expectations of what God's love would look like and mean for them practically. Put bluntly, they didn't get from God what they thought they should get from God, what they wanted from God, what they demanded from God, what they thought they had a right to.

So the conclusion is, well, if God doesn't give me what I want, then God doesn't love me. Now, doesn't that sound very familiar to us? But at another point, there might be something even more sinister happening here.

It's quite likely, I think, that their questioning of God's love was because they wanted to avoid the implications of acknowledging it.

In other words, they wanted the benefits of God's blessing, but didn't want to feel a sense of indebtedness to the Lord for his love.

Or they didn't want to have a sense of responsibility to the Lord given his love and given his ongoing relationship with them. So in a sense, I think God's people might be playing a very clever victim status game here.

[15:53] That is, casting themselves as victims, suggesting that God was at fault in all of this interaction, and thereby shifting the focus away from their own heart response to a perceived failure on God's part.

Now again, isn't that so very familiar to us in how we operate our own relationships at different levels? We play the victim and push the responsibility onto somebody else.

And I think that fits with verse 5. At your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, great is the Lord beyond the border of Israel. I think what the Lord's saying there is that their response to God's love should have demonstrated to the world how great God is.

That was God's desire for his people. It wasn't the reason why he loved them, but it was a desired outcome of his love. And then God's people have also lost their vision of God's value and worth, picking up from verses 6 onwards then.

And again, the Lord cuts through and moves beyond all the various religious activities of his people. And he exposes the heart attitude that are behind all the books taking religious activities.

[17 : 33] And this part of section is addressed to the priests, but I think the connection is that while the priests particularly are being pinged by the Lord, their attitude has sort of trickled down and become the attitude of the whole people.

So we can say in modern parlance, from the very top down, this attitude has just become debased and sloppy in response to the Lord. They're still going through the motions, doing the ritual worship, but the Lord shows there's no vitality, no substance in it.

It is what we call box ticking. Verse 6 again, they claim to love, they love to claim God as their father, but there's no concern to honor him as an obedient child.

There's no concern to treat him as an honorable, worthy father. They're quick to say that God is their master, their ruler, or their king, but care little for their approach to God and care little for respect of him in his holiness.

In short, they've taken their relationship with God for granted. Again, in modern parlance, their actions speak much, much louder than their words. And it reveals their heart attitude which has trivialized and made a mockery of God's name, of God's character.

[19 : 13] And again, God's people try to deny this reality. They try to protest their innocence. But the plain truth was that they no longer thought of God as worthy to be served.

No longer thought of God as worthy to be honored as a great God or a loving father. Look at verse 13.

This is just awful in the extreme, isn't it? The Lord exposing what's in their hearts. They wouldn't say this out loud, but this is what they're feeling in their hearts. What a weariness this is.

That is, the reference to serving the Lord. Ho-hum, what a weariness this is. And you snort at it.

Snorting, as far as I can see, is just a sort of a contemptuous, ugh, I'm stuck here. I really don't want to be doing this, but I can't see any other way out of it, so I suppose I have to get on with it.

[20 : 21] It's dreadful. Dreadful. In their heart, they resented the demands of relationship with the Lord.

That relationship which was one of blessing and goodness, which you'd think would automatically would bring thankfulness, but it doesn't. They resent it. Why?

Because of the implications and responsibilities attached to it. serving the Lord was tedious and boring and restricting.

So their worship became formal box ticking. They were just doing what they thought in terms of sacrifices and prayers and going to the temple. They were doing what they thought would keep God on side, maintain respectability before others of their countrymen, secure the practical benefits they wanted from the Lord and thought they deserved and perhaps even expected.

Giving them to the Lord in reward for their efforts of doing the sacrifices and praying. So it becomes a circular argument. It's just so empty and formal and offensive.

[21 : 39] So put simply, we can say that God's people didn't even begin to love him in the way that he had loved them. Jordan Peterson defines love as ascribing the highest value to something.

Well, God intended his love for his people to lead them to ascribe to him the highest value imaginable, the greatest obedience possible, the most extravagant praise expressible.

In other words, God expected a response to his love from his people that would quite literally idolize him because that's what it is to idolize somebody.

It is to ascribe the highest value to them and make them the center of your attention and worship.

But far from idolizing the Lord, they treated him with shame as they idolized themselves because that's really what they're doing here.

They're idolizing themselves before God because they looked at God and then they looked at what they were doing in the religious activities and they added them all up and thought well actually God should sort of be quite happy and content and even grateful that we would do this for him and be like this to him.

[23 : 19] That God would be very happy just with whatever they chose to give him. And that then extends into they developed a forgiveness is easy attitude to sin.

There's a lot in here about sacrifices and there will be in the subsequent chapters. At the heart of the sacrificial system was the reality and Matt and Grace brought that out again this morning was the reality that it was actually very very difficult for the holy or clean God to maintain fellowship or have any fellowship with dirty or sinful people.

The holy and clean don't mix with the dirty and sinful. In God's loving provision for his people the proper offering of a sacrifice ensured that sin wasn't a barrier to ongoing relationship ongoing fellowship ongoing communion between God and his people even as his people continued to be sinful.

The sacrifice averted God's wrath God's judgment. Now the seriousness of sin is reflected in the demand for the quality of the substitute sacrifice.

Only the best was acceptable as an offering or substitute. The choicest portion of food the best of the flock were but what were these people presenting to the Lord as a symbol of how serious they thought their sins were and how much they thought their relationship with the Lord was under threat.

[25 : 06] Well vegetables had pretty well gone off in the fridge. They're a bit too far gone to have for tea. We'll take them to the temple for sacrifice. They won't be wasted.

We're being very modern and economical and environmental. Or they would come across an animal in their field that had been taken by violence.

In other words it was already dead. Killed by some reason or other. Oh beauty a sacrifice. Or they'd look around for an animal who was about to die.

It was sick, diseased, deformed. That would be good enough. We don't really want it anyway. It's not going to cost us too much. That will work out fine for a sacrifice. That was the attitude.

As I express it without hopefully hearing just how abhorrent that is. And they took them all to the temple and guess what?

[26 : 09] The priests didn't question any of it. The priests said the same attitude. Yeah, that'll be fine. You're here, taking all the bucks. And each time that happened, God's people were heaping shame on the Lord.

Even worse, verse 14. Cursed be the cheat who is a maleness flock and vows it and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished.

So here's the duplicity of God's people. Knowing that God can see the attitudes of their heart. What are they doing? With their lips they're saying, look, I'm deadly serious about worshipping the Lord. I will only give the Lord the best because the Lord's only worth the best. Or worth only the best, whichever the right way to say that is. And then they turn around all the while intending to just give them a rubbish sacrifice.

And the offense of that to the Lord is mentioned here. Brazen dishonesty and deceit as if somehow or other they could pull one over on the Lord.

[27 : 34] giving him the rubbish and keeping the best for themselves. What's behind that attitude? Well, behind that attitude is the thought that sin isn't a big deal.

And forgiveness is something that God is expected to do. And it's not a big deal for him either. And even worse is the offense that this caused the Lord.

If you look in verse 7, the altar is referred to the table. And there's only two places that happens in the Old Testament as far as I can understand and they're both here in Malachi. And I think what it's doing here is talking about the altar as a sacrifice but then the table is a picture of fellowship and the two things come together in a sacrifice.

So the sacrifice is to deal with sin that then allows for ongoing fellowship. So it's very much like a family meal in a sense. A little bit like Lord's supper but there are obviously very significant differences.

But there's that idea of fellowship. And so it's as if God's people were coming to his table waltzing in without any regard for the holiness of the Lord.

[28 : 51] Careless near enough is good enough attitude trivialized the basis of fellowship with God as if it was very easily achieved very easily maintained and very hard to break.

And then look at Lord's summary in verse 10 and 11. Oh that there was one among you who would shut the doors.

He's talking about the temple there. Let me paraphrase that. I wish to goodness somebody would just close the doors and close the temple down that you wouldn't be bothered kindling fire on my

altar because it's a serious waste of your time and mine.

I have no pleasure in you says the Lord of hosts and I will not accept an offering from your hand but then he goes on to say something seems to be quite contradictory from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations and in every place incense will be offered to my name and a pure offering for my name will be great among the nations says the Lord of hosts the Lord is deeply deeply offended by the treatment of his people they are in serious serious danger he's not surprised by it however this is nothing new in verse 15 as well as verse 11 as the great king he is he will continue to display himself to all the nations as a great king so

I move then to just draw some application and conclusion out of this passage because verse 10 and 11 put a huge amount of tension and threat and at the same time anticipation into God's last challenge of his people before his silence of 400 plus years and then the arrival of Jesus and here's the threat he will not accept an offering from their hand which leaves them under the guilt of their sin and under the imminent threat of God's wrath God's judgment and yet the Lord says there will be sacrifice to my name and my name will be great and there will be a pure sacrifice so the tension then is how will Lord do both how will he continue to his promise to love and bless his people while at the same time refusing to accept a sacrifice from their hand a people who refuse to idolize them and treat sin with impunity and yet he wants to relate to them as the holy

[32 : 07] God how will he do that how will he find pleasure in people verse 10 that he says he has no pleasure in and against all that God's promise his name will be great there will be acceptable relationship there will be intimate fellowship at his table in the future friends these things are totally incompatible until we hear what I love to say is the whisper of Jesus in the words of Malachi listen now turn with me to Romans chapter 5 we're just going to touch down there just fairly quickly and I'm done then Romans chapter 5 verse 6 7 and 8 for while we were still weak at the right time Christ died for the ungodly for one will scarcely die for a righteous person though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die but

God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us since therefore we have now been justified by his blood how much more shall we be saved by him from the how do we move away from incompatible statements well it's simply this God has always been working towards Jesus throughout the Old Testament because Jesus is the greatest demonstration of his love which would do two things both it would deal with the sin of his people and renew them from the inside out so they have new attitudes new desires new ability to idolize him and so when God says here to

Malachi I will not accept an offering from your hand I will not accept a sin or fellowship offering from your hand opening the way to enjoy a place at my table when he said that all the while he was thinking and that's because I intend to present an offering from my own hand that will do for you that which you cannot do for yourself God's people couldn't offer that which was necessary to deal with sin and renew fellowship God took that on board and his intention all along was to do that for his people knowing that the only way he would have a great nation without number that would idolize him is if he dealt with their sin and renewed their hearts and we see in Jesus then the nature and extent of

God's love God really did give the best of the flock as it were so to speak his only son he really did give the best for the sake of the worst immeasurable cost to himself God gave his best to die so the worst might live and that my friends is what we call the gospel more than that we see Jesus in the New Testament contrasted with these priests Jesus is the true priest when the priests in Malachi's day got it wrong all God's people got it wrong in line with them but when Jesus the great high priest gets it right then all God's people get it right in line with them the great high priest who properly understood the seriousness of sin who properly mediated between

God and his people who properly brought them both to the altar which was himself and the sacrifice which was himself so that there might be a dealing with sin and a renewal of fellowship that the Lord's people might come to his table forever in enjoyment Jesus is the great high priest God's people have always needed but never had until Jesus turns up and all of us all of that enables us to idolize the Lord in our everyday response to him our everyday worship and as one writer says if we can see that vision of the Lord then it will be both soul thrilling and sin destroying soul thrilling and sin destroying soul thrilling as we understand the extent of

[37 : 34] God's love sin destroying as we gladly live out our indebtedness under the hand of the Lord Jesus friends I just finish on this then there will be some here this morning who aren't believers

a very simple question for you if you're not yet a Christian then it would seem to me that you've not yet properly considered and understood those three simple words that the Lord wants to say to you today I have loved you God loves you wants to be your father and calls you to be his child to a life of blessing and renewal what would stop you from doing that unless you're determined to continue to idolise yourself and think you can work out some sort of deal with God that will secure your future that may be your thinking at the moment but I tell you it's dangerous ground to stand on and if you are a believer then do you see how you're reluctant to respond wholeheartedly to God is so very ugly

Malachi is a book I've lived in a lot over the last seven or eight years and this is what I come back to time and time and time again the ugliness of speaking of God's love and yet deliberately and willfully holding back my best as I respond to him oh I know as Christians we're constantly speaking of promising God the best in everything we say well the best of our time the best of our thinking the best of our energies the best of our lives the best of our money God the God the God the God the God the God the best of all these things and we're so readily content to serve up to the Lord the leftovers the things in our life that cost us little to give over friends let's not shame the Lord by our actions even while we speak of honoring him all visions