

Faithfulness Matters

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[0 : 00] Well, being faithful to your word at work, uni, relationships, all that sort of thing, being faithful used to be the norm. But these days, it seems to depend on who you are as to how faithful you have to be. Now, to show you what I mean, I thought I'd start with a crowd participation moment. I'm going to show you a name and photo of a type of person, and you can call out whether, yes, you think they're faithful, or no, you think they're not faithful. So are these types of people generally seen as faithful? So the first one, our next slide, politicians.

No, no. All right, next one, doctors. Victor. Yes. Yeah, okay, he's not sure. What about the next one?

Secondhand card salesman. I've got a story about that, but that's another time. What about the next one, pastors? Yes, I had a big no over there. Oh, dear. Yes, absolutely, especially this one. What about the next one?

Mmm, silence. All right. Thanks, Pung. Well, as we come to Malachi today, we see that while Israel ought to be faithful because of who they are, God's people, they are actually being unfaithful. Now, this is the next big issue that Malachi addresses, and we can see it by the way the word unfaithful comes up five times in seven verses here. Remember, I pointed out two weeks ago that Malachi is a book calling Israel to recommit in their relationship with God, and it addresses six issues that exist in their relationship at the moment. The first one was denying God's love, chapter one, verse two. Remember, we saw a couple of weeks ago that Israel felt like God had lost that love and feeling. And then last week, chapter one, verse six, the issue was dishonoring God, not giving God the honor he deserves, not giving God what is right, but giving God what is left.

[2 : 09] And this week, the issue is unfaithfulness. And Malachi begins by calling them to be faithful in three areas because of who they are. Firstly, they had to be faithful to each other generally. So at point one in your outline, verse 10 in your Bibles, he says, Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another? Now, here we see that the Jews were being unfaithful to one another. Malachi, I think, will go on to give two specific examples of unfaithfulness in a moment.

But I think here, just in verse 10, he seems to introduce it as general unfaithfulness to each other. And that's because later on, he'll start listing all the different ways they've been unfaithful. So if you've got your Bibles, just flick over one page to chapter three, verse five. And he lists a whole host of ways that they've been unfaithful. Chapter three, verse five, God says, I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, unfaithful to God, adulterers, unfaithful in marriage, perjurers, unfaithful into the truth, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, unfaithful employers who oppress the widows and the fatherless and deprive the foreigners among you of justice. And do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty. See, they are unfaithful in all these ways, whether it's to the truth, to their workers, or even to the oppressed and the poor amongst them. They are being unfaithful to each other.

Now, it's easy to imagine why this has happened. I remember they've just returned from exile. Life is hard. And it feels like, you know, as I said, God has lost that loving feeling. And so it's just easier to look after yourself, cut corners, cheat one another to get ahead rather than to trust God to provide. But Malachi says, remember who you are. The one God, verse 10, has created you. They have one father who has adopted you. In other words, you are his people. And being God's people means three things. At first, they are God's children since God is their father. Last week in chapter one, verse six, God called himself their father again. And two weeks ago, we saw how God loved them by choosing to adopt them as his firstborn sons, even though Esau was the legitimate firstborn son, if you remember. And so since God is their father and they are his sons, and they are to reflect their father's likeness. God says this more clearly elsewhere. He says, be holy as I am

holy, which included being faithful like him. I was driving in a car or our car one day when someone cut us off on the road and one of the kids yelled, come on, what are you doing? I thought, I know exactly where they've got that from. Their mother. It's completely, no, no, it was me. It was me. But kids imitate parents. And even you here tonight who have promised you will never turn out to be like your parents when you grow up. Guess what? You will be in one way or another.

[5 : 33] Well, Malachi reminds you that they are God's people whom God created and adopted. And that means he is their father. They are his children and they are to reflect their father's likeness, including faithfulness. But second, being God's people also means they are united. And I think Malachi seems to highlight this in particular because he repeats the word one in verse 10. Do you see that?

They all have the one God who created them and the one father who adopted them, which means they're actually united together as one people. That's who they are. And so they are to be faithful to one another to keep the unity as one people. Because unfaithfulness creates disunity, doesn't it? If someone is unfaithful or untrustworthy, it breaks relationship and unity, whether it's a marriage or friendship or a sports team or work or university group. One of the things I really didn't like at uni was doing those group assignments. Do you ever had to do one of those? I heard some groans already.

Yep. And they were particularly terrible if you couldn't pick your group because invariably you'd end up with someone who was not faithful to their assigned task. And so that meant you had to do their work, but it also meant their unfaithfulness broke the unity of the group. You know, the group members would talk about them and despise them. I remember some group members trying to kick out this one particular guy of the group. The point is unfaithfulness creates disunity, not unity or oneness.

But Malachi reminds them they are one people because they all have the one God and father. And so they had to keep their oneness by being faithful to each other. But the third thing being one of God's people means is that they are still under the covenant of their ancestors. You see, if they all have the same God and father, then they're not only united to each other now, they're also united to their ancestors before who had the same God as well.

[7 : 40] And so their ancestors' covenant still applies to them. That's why in verse 10, Malachi adds at the end of the verse, by being unfaithful, they profane or break the covenant of our ancestors.

And now this covenant or agreement was the one that God made with Israel at Mount Sinai through Moses. It included the Ten Commandments, things like not bearing false witness, you know, being faithful to the truth, not committing adultery, being faithful in marriage, and not stealing from one another, being faithful to your neighbor, and so on. But since they were doing these very things, chapter 3, verse 5, then they were breaking the covenant.

And the thing is, that meant they weren't just being unfaithful to each other, they're actually being unfaithful to God who made the covenant. And I wonder if we sometimes forget this fact, you know, whether we sometimes forget that doing wrong to people is also doing wrong to God.

That when we sin against people, we also sin against God. I remember being struck by this some years ago in the story of the prodigal son.

Do you remember how the son asks for his father's inheritance, dishonours his father's, goes away, spends it all, and then ends up in the pigsty? You know, and then he comes to his senses.

[9 : 05] Do you remember what he says? It's on the next slide, I think. So on the next slide, he says, I will set out and go back to my father and say to him, Father, I have sinned against heaven and against you.

Notice he says, I have sinned against heaven, God, as well as sinning against his earthly father. You see, to be unfaithful to one another was to be unfaithful to God as well.

And so in this one verse, Malachi reminds them that they are God's people whom he created and adopted. And that means they are his, firstly, his sons who are to reflect the father's likeness.

And secondly, they are one people who are to keep the unity by being faithful. And thirdly, they are still God's covenant people who are to keep the covenant by being faithful.

See, because of who they are, faithfulness really matters. And it's the same for us. God sent his only son, Jesus, to pay for our sins at the cross, so that we might be part of his new covenant people and be adopted as his sons.

[10 : 18] We saw this two weeks ago in Ephesians 1. Remember, this idea of being a son is not sexist. It's just the one who inherited the inheritance. But Paul goes on to say in our second reading

that we are also a new creation.

And so we are to put on the new self created to be like God in holiness and righteousness. We are to follow God's example as dearly loved children.

And that includes faithfulness, especially with our words. It's interesting that in our second reading, which is up on the screen there, the very first thing that Paul writes after saying we are to be like God, put on the new self created to be like God in true holiness and righteousness.

The first thing he says is be faithful with your words. Put off falsehood. Speak truthfully to one another. I remember as a kid, I lied to my parents one time.

And I thought it was okay because I had my fingers crossed behind my back. Like some friends at school said that worked. I very soon realized that it's not okay. I had a very sore behind. Actually, I'm not sure if you should say that.

[11:26] But we are not to be people who cross our fingers so we can break our word. We are to be people who are to be faithful to our word. How many times have you heard people say, oh, we should catch up sometime?

When what they really mean is not ever at any time. If we say it, then we should do it. Or not say it. And if we say we'll turn up to something, then turn up or apologize if you cannot. And when we turn up to things, we should turn up on time. Unless the real time is fashionably late time. I can't keep up these days.

We have to be faithful with our words to each other. I was talking with someone from our 1030 congregation who works in the city. And he actually had people coming to him from work, non-Christians, to confide in him about their relationship issues or work issues or parental issues and so on.

And they said, oh, look, we know you're a guy of integrity. Someone who lives out his Christian values, keeps his words. And so we know you'll keep our confidence.

[12:33] In other words, he was faithful and people saw it. And his faithfulness not only attracted others to confide in him, but gave him opportunities to talk to them about our faithful God, who gave his faithful son to die for us.

You see, because of who we are, we are to be faithful to each other. Well, Malachi now moves from the general faithfulness of one another, and he hones in on two specific examples of Israel's unfaithfulness.

Firstly, to God. So point to verse 11. He says, Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem.

Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign God. Here, Malachi calls the whole nation of Judah unfaithful.

Why? Well, because they have desecrated or polluted the sanctuary God loves. And now the word sanctuary is literally holy.

[13:40] So it could refer to the temple, which was the holy place, although the word place is not there where God dwelt. Or it could refer to the people themselves, his holy people whom God loves.

I suspect it's the latter. But either way, they have polluted what was meant to be holy or set apart for God alone. How?

Well, by marrying women who brought their foreign gods amongst God's people. Now, again, we can understand why Israel might have done this. So when they returned from exile, they didn't have much.

All the businesses and the markets and the trade were run by the foreigners living in their country when they got back there. And so what better way to get ahead than by getting into the foreigner's family?

Now, to be clear, the issue is not marrying foreigners. The issue is marrying foreigners who worship other gods. And I doubt the Jews themselves worship these foreign gods.

[14:47] But by simply allowing them into their homes, into their nation, they were no longer holy or set apart for God alone. God was no longer the only God dwelling amongst them.

There were all these other gods. As they prayed to the true God, their wife was in the next room praying to her false God. And so the nation's holiness was desecrated or polluted.

I remember one time my wife cooking this beautiful chicken teriyaki stir fry. And then one of my kids put tomato sauce on it. This beautiful chicken stir fry had been set apart for teriyaki sauce and now is polluted or desecrated by tomato sacrilege.

Actually, what Judah did was much, much worse. That's rather trite. It was more like someone bringing a Nazi flag into a Jewish synagogue.

Can you imagine how offensive that would be? And yet, by bringing other gods into God's nation to be worshipped alongside him, the Jews were being even more offensive than someone bringing a Nazi flag into a Jewish synagogue.

[16:05] In fact, so offensive, Malachi calls it in verse 11, a detestable thing. And then he says in verse 12, As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him or cut him off from the tents of Jacob, even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty.

It's pretty serious, isn't it? But you see, that's how much faithfulness to God matters. And again, it's similar for us.

Christ has died to pay for our sins and make us God's holy nation. As Peter writes on the next slide from 1 Peter chapter 2. So we are to be set apart for God alone.

He alone is to have our whole worship, which means we are not to pollute ourselves by entertaining the worship of other gods. And like Judah, that, I think, includes whom we marry.

So on the next slide, in 1 Corinthians 7, Paul writes, he says, She, the person who's able to be married, she is free to marry anyone she wishes. So it's not racism, you can get anyone from any country.

[17:28] But he must belong to the Lord. Did you notice that? She's free to marry any guy from any country, but he must belong to the Lord.

In other words, we are supposed to marry fellow Christians because we are God's people who are set apart for him. We're not meant to join ourselves to others who worship other gods. And so bring their gods into our lives.

Whether it's the God of another religion or the gods of Melbourne, like money and career and so on, that non-Christians chase after. Because what often ends up happening is you end up turning away from the true God and following their false gods.

Can I say, given this is the five o'clock congregation and many of you in marriage country, can I say, missionary dating doesn't work all the time.

Don't get me wrong, I know of people who have gone out with non-Christians to convert them and they have been converted. But that is not proof it's a good thing to do. It's simply proof that God is incredibly gracious.

[18:35] I also need to say that sometimes a spouse becomes a Christian after they've been married, after you've been married, or a spouse moves away from God while you were married, or we weren't just mature enough Christians when we did get married.

Or in some cultures, it was an arranged marriage. God is good. He understands all the complexities of life. And so he says, if that's the case, don't divorce them.

Rather, stay married to them if they're willing. After all, God may use your witness to bring them to Christ. That's all in 1 Corinthians chapter 7. I don't have time to unpack it now. You see, it matters who we bring into our lives, that we don't entertain the worship of other gods.

And I think this has wider application than just who we marry. It means making sure we don't follow any other gods to be worshipped in our lives. As Jesus said on the next slide, he says, we are to worship God and serve him only.

So in our house, for example, we've entered the kind of stage of life, the brand name clothes stage of life, where brand name clothes are almost worshipped.

[19:45] Oh, that's a bit harsh for my kids. But, you know, it could be worshipped. And so as a parent, I need to be careful that I don't allow any of these things to be worshipped in our house. And if you're not a parent, then you may have no choice about what happens in your house, but you can still seek to not allow anything else to become God in your life, whether work or money, clothes or sport, or even Netflix.

I just got back from our 10 days leave. And let me tell you, it was so easy to spend time watching the latest Lost in Space series or a salvation series on Netflix and forget all about spending time in prayer to the God who gave me true salvation in Christ.

It's easy. The point is, as far as it depends on you, we're not to entertain the worship of other gods in our lives. Instead, with God's help, we are to faithfully worship him alone.

For we are his holy people set apart for him. Well, the last example of unfaithfulness also has to do with marriage, but this time it's about staying married, being faithful to your spouse.

Point three, verse 13. He says, And you ask, Why?

[21 : 07] Well, it is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the Lord God made you one? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth. Here the Israelites, in verse 13, are weeping and wailing and flooding the altar with tears. This threefold description here is meant to suggest excessive emotion.

It's the kind of carry-on people who worship other gods do that we see in the Bible, like the prophets of Baal, who dance and prance around to get Baal to answer their prayers.

And you can read about that in 1 Kings 18. And so here it seems like that some of the foreign religious practices were already starting to rub off on Israel.

[22 : 11] But in verse 14, when they ask why God no longer accepts their sacrifices, Malachi says, it is because they have been unfaithful to the wife of their youth.

That is their first wife. You see, it seems that they were divorcing their first wives in order to marry a foreign wife so they could get ahead in business, trade, because life was hard.

But such unfaithfulness to their spouse is a problem for three reasons. At first, verse 15, God has made them one. Verse 15, I need to say in our translation, verse 15 is very hard to translate from the Hebrew.

I think the old version of the NIV got it right. So let me put it, there it is on the screen. Has not he, God, made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one?

Because he was seeking godly offspring. We see this even in Genesis chapter 2, I think, which is on the next slide. Genesis chapter 2, verse 24.

[23 : 15] We're told a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh. Jesus reiterates this in Matthew 19 and he adds, you know, what God has joined together, let no one separate.

And so I think this is what's going on in verse 15. God has designed marriage so that they become one. And so faithfulness to your spouse matters because of who you are. One.

That's the first reason. The second reason that faithfulness matters to your spouse is because God desires godly offspring. Verse 15. I mean, God knows how hard it is to be a parent, let alone a Christian parent who seeks to raise their kids in, you know, the training and instruction of the Lord. That's why we as a church should do what we can to support single parents or parents where they have a, where there's a spouse who does not believe. Help them out to raise their kids in the way of Christ.

But here faithfulness matters because it helps to raise godly kids. Let me say, it doesn't guarantee it. And a single parent can still raise a godly child.

[24 : 20] And if you're a child who has no Christian parents, then God can still raise you to be a godly person. But it does help having two Christian parents who are faithful to each other. And the third reason faithfulness to the spouse matters is because the alternative is divorce.

And that is disastrous. Have a look at verse 16. He says, The man who hates and divorces his wife, says the Lord, the God of Israel, does violence to the one he should protect, says the Lord Almighty.

So be on your guard and do not be unfaithful. You see, faithfulness to your spouse matters because the alternative is divorce, which is like hating and committing an act of violence against them.

They're strong words, aren't they? And again, I need to say that there are some reasons why people might have to be divorced. Some of those reasons are even given in the Bible.

In fact, God divorces Israel at one point. So divorce can happen. It's just disastrous when it does. For it affects not just the couple, emotionally, relationally, even financially.

[25 : 36] It also affects the children and the wider biological family and even the church family. And sadly, many here know all too well what I'm talking about.

So faithfulness in marriage matters. And not just because God made married couples to be one, not just because it helps produce godly offspring, but also because it avoids divorce, which effectively does violence to those involved.

And faithfulness in marriage particularly matters today because our society is going the completely other way. So if you are married here tonight, then pray that God will keep you faithful to your promises.

And if you're not married here tonight, then pray for those who are, including your parents. And pray that should you be married one day, that you too would be faithful.

Well, I started with some slides of people who are either known for being faithful or known for being not faithful, unfaithful. And let me finish with one last slide.

[26 : 46] I wonder who you'd say for this last one on the next slide. What would you say? You're too busy looking for yourself in the picture, aren't you? It's an old picture. Now, the thing to remember, of course, is God is gracious.

And as people of the new covenant, God gives us unlimited forgiveness when we are unfaithful. And God gives us his spirit to help us be faithful. So whether it's faithfulness to each other with our words and so on, or faithfulness to God in our lives, or faithfulness to our spouse in marriage, as far as it depends on you, verse 16, be on your guard and do not be unfaithful.

Let's pray. Our gracious Father, we do thank you for this word from Malachi tonight about the importance of faithfulness in different aspects of our lives.

And Father, we pray that you'd remind us by your spirit of who we are, that you've created us, adopted us, and made us to be your holy people.

And so, Father, we do pray that you might help us to reflect your likeness and to be faithful like you. For we ask it in Jesus' name.

[28 : 05] Amen.