

# Why does God not accept us with favour?

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[ 0 : 00 ] Please be seated. Welcome to all of you who may be guests with us here this morning. It's marvelous to have you with us, and baptisms are great occasions to be reminded of the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ and the covenant that He strikes with His people.

As Dan mentioned, and before we actually said that covenant, in the form of the Apostles' Creed, read, well, our church has been going through a series on Malachi.

Malachi was the last prophet who spoke to God's people before a long period of silence, and then Jesus came into the world. And the text today is not a baptism text.

You might have noticed when it was read. But it is about another covenant. So, baptism is about a covenant that we enter into by God's invitation and His grace and initiative in our life.

Marriage is a covenant as well. It's one that He is in very much. And all of us don't enter into that covenant, but there are some parallels between the two.

[ 1 : 20 ] J.B. Phillips once wrote a book that was called, *Your God is Too Small*. Today's message could be, *Your marriage is too small*.

I'm not advocating polygamy, just in case you're wondering. Actually, the title is, *Why Does God Not Accept Us With Favor?* The message of Malachi 2, verses 10-16, is a call to faithfulness, and that marriage is a picture of the covenant of God with His people upholding, on the one hand, holiness, and on the other hand, unity.

The institution of marriage is a gift to help us understand our Lord's nature. It's very close to who He is. And especially for people who tend to be complacent or contemptuous towards the Lord, like those in Malachi's day.

Marriage, at the time Malachi brought his message to bear, was in trouble. Marriage at this time in our life is in trouble as well, even though the Bible says some pretty basic things about a good marriage.

Malachi uses some alarming words regarding marriage in this reading today, including profane, abomination, and violence. They're not quite as graphic as last week's was, and Jeff did a great job with that word, dung.

[ 2 : 46 ] Thankfully, it doesn't show up again today. But the big word today is faithless, or broken faith, or shattered trust. All of these apply to the state of marriage in Israel.

We know from Genesis, then, that God created man, male and female. He created them in His image, a faithful covenant between two people, a husband and a wife, with God right in it with them. Marriage is a picture of this relationship also, though, between Christ and His church. Bride and groom is the analogy used by the apostles Paul and John as well.

There's a lot at stake in this institution and image of marriage. Because marriage is a covenant, which is more than a legal contract, and goes way beyond a social construct.

C-O-V-E-N-A-N-T is the way that God spells love in the Bible. It is the way the Lord reveals His love to people. And in today's reading, we learn about two dimensions of this covenant in marriage that are really important to our Lord and our church.

[ 3 : 52 ] And the first one is holiness, and the second one is unity. So let's look at those two, holiness and unity. Last week, we learned that priests failed the Lord, and they did it in a big way two times.

They didn't keep the Lord's ways, was the first way. And secondly, they showed partiality in their instruction. The Anglican tradition states in the Articles of Religion that the marks of the true church is where the gospel is purely preached and the sacraments are duly ministered.

The priests of Malachi's day would not have passed that exam. They failed the holiness or the purity test to teach the truth, the law, the Father's instruction for His children, for His nation Israel.

Failed instruction, teaching or preaching, invariably then transmits, leads to idolatry and then immorality.

It always happens in that order. Holiness cannot rise out of idolatry. So it's not even surprising or predictable, you might say, that the Israelites then rejected and rebelled against the Lord because of these priests' failure to teach the truth.

[ 5 : 07 ] The Israelites are found guilty then of breaking faith and committing abomination as shown in verse 11. How does this show up? It shows up in two ways.

First, generally it shows up by their profaning the sanctuary, that holy place, that place of holiness. But more specifically, it shows up when Judah married the daughters of a foreign god.

This was explicitly prohibited in Exodus 34, beginning at verse 11, and then Deuteronomy chapter 7, verses 3 to 4. This covenant, this marriage then, is an act of worship that's associated with the covenant between God and His people.

And so that's why Malachi equates marrying the daughter of a foreign god with faithlessness, brokenness, shattered trust. It's an offense to the Lord.

Now, the daughter of a foreign god isn't likely to take offense at this, but the Lord does. But why didn't the Israelites keep the covenant resulting in upholding the holiness of marriage and worship?

[ 6 : 16 ] Some explanations are that it was for economic or social or political reasons outwardly.

You see, the post-Axilic Israel wanted to get ahead and get on in this world when they returned to the promised land, to Jerusalem, to Israel.

But with very little means, inwardly, they didn't trust in the sufficiency of God's grace and mercy and kindness and provision for them.

And so they married for a different kind of gain, salvation even, security for themselves, taking it into their own hands. And so they broke faith with the grace of God who brought them out of slavery back in Egypt and now brought them out of exile back into Jerusalem.

They didn't think that they had to do it according to God's ways. And are we that much different in our motivation for marriage? Do you remember, what might have explained your choice of a spouse?

Those who might be looking for one, what motivates your search? Does it have any connection with worship of Christ? Does it have anything to do with holiness, purity, righteousness?

[ 7 : 33 ] One of the shifts of our current culture is our motivation for marriage. I was struck recently how much our motivation for marriage has changed when reading all books I discovered this, the book being Frankenstein by Mary Shelley.

Listen to what the narrator says about his father's motivation for marrying someone who was actually quite younger than he. There was a difference in their unity.

But this was the father's motivation for marriage and staying in that marriage. He says, Now Shelley wasn't a Christian and who knows where this father in this story stood, but don't you find that quite a contrast to the world in which we live in today?

Well, marriage is a matter of holiness.

I know it wasn't stated in that quote, but it's the context of the first half of this text today. We used to call this holy matrimony.

[ 8 : 55 ] And I figure that marriage is a kind of a discipleship school in holiness and purity and righteousness and justice and grace and mercy and forgiveness.

In it, we grow in all of that by the grace of God who gives us the gift, I think, to continue on in the face of what's really difficult. So, there is more to marriage, though, than holiness, which I think rises by guarding faith, but it falls by breaking faith.

Marriage, according to Malachi, is also about unity. So, what does that unity look like? Well, there is a union achieved when a husband and wife in the wedding hear an exhortation, they give their consent to one another, they strike vows, they receive a blessing, and the intent and the result is unity.

The two become one. So, marriage is for holiness, but it also achieves unity. And Malachi gives us a description of what happens in marriage. In verse 15, we read, Did not he, that is the Lord, make them one with a portion of the Spirit in that union?

So, we can see the problem the Lord has with the Israelites' marriage. They are faithless, or breaking faith, right from the start, when they join in marriage with the daughter of a foreign god.

[10:25] The union, then becomes a picture, or a parallel, of Israel's union with foreign gods. So, Israel has broken covenant with the Lord by striking a covenant with another god through a marriage.

Yeah, Israel, it's interesting as you follow the story then, back in verse 12 and 13. They act like it's no big deal, but God calls them on this. You see, they go on as if they're being faithful to the Lord of hosts.

They show up at worship, they bring their offerings, and they expect them to please the Lord. But they know then that the Lord finds no favor and refuses to accept their acts of worship.

And then what do they do? Well, they cover the altar with tears and weeping and moaning and groaning. Why, O Lord? The text doesn't say that, but that's in effect what they're wondering.

Why won't he receive our offerings, our worship with favor? And they pretend not to get it. But the Lord cannot accept the offering with this sin in their lives that obstructs their worship, gets in the way of it.

[11:39] And the foreign god actually then is ruling their hearts, which explains why God won't accept their worship. This now foreign god who is uniting himself, herself with them, obstructing their worship of the one true living God.

And this is quite tragic because it means that someone else has gained influence over God's people, over the husband who then goes and marries a daughter of a foreign god.

Tragic because it's the Lord who originally witnessed the union in verse 14. That's what it says there. And this turns tragic.

This tender union, which is stated there, that included the wife of the husband's youth, the one who made a real companion, the one who the husband joined in covenant, and finally down in verse 15, the promise of a godly offspring.

Don't you find that sad? Deeply grievous. Well, if wise and wealthy Solomon couldn't raise godly offspring because he was tempted, and then married, formed covenants with women of affording God, then it's probable that Israel, and we won't either.

[13:00] But that's not the only reason the Lord would not receive or accept Israel's worship. It goes from bad to worse. The union was then broken by divorce.

Priests began giving permission for divorce. This was probably their partiality in their teaching. Men were returning to Jerusalem and Israel with their wives, and when they turned up and saw what it was like there and wanted what the other people had, the other foreigners in the land, well, then they decided one way to have what the other foreigners did was to then actually divorce and remarry, which is exactly what they do.

Well, the Lord lets his people know that what he thinks of this in verse 16, he says this, the man covers his garment with violence.

Now, that's pretty harsh. He must exist. It's pretty graphic accusation and warning. Other translations go to the back of the beginning of this and state that the Lord hates divorce.

The ESV doesn't translate it in those terms the NIV used to. That's probably not a good translation, but it's as it unfolds what God is saying that there is a violence that actually occurs in divorce.

[14:23] This is actually the hardest, probably, verse in all of Scripture to translate. I don't actually have the skills to do it, but I know this, and that is that most of the translators will come down on the same side in terms of the forest versus the trees of this.

And the operative word here is actually violence. There is a violence that's done to the covenant in divorce. There's a violence that's done to the two people in that divorce.

There's also a violence that's done to children, right? I know of men and women and children, too, who've suffered the effects of divorce and the likes of post-traumatic stress disorder.

If you think it doesn't sound very loving that our Lord would see things in these terms, I think, and I know from conversations with people, that the couples who've been divorced, children, parents, friends, maybe even lawyers.

Now, actually, I spoke to a lawyer about this this morning. They, too, hate the causes and the effects of divorce. But that's not to say that it's never permitted.

[15:35] Malachi doesn't take this up, but both Moses and Jesus provided some opportunities, some grounds, as it were, for divorce. And the biblical grounds are adultery and abuse.

But that's not the case with Israel and Malachi's message. And more often than not, it's not the case in the world in which we live in. Though there is abuse, there is adultery, and those are grounds for

divorce.

In an Anglican wedding, the service begins with the exhortation of marriage, and at one point, the exhortation reads this. Matrimony was ordained for the hallowing of the union of a man and a woman.

The emphasis, actually, here is on union. After the husband and the wife say their vows, then a pastor quotes Jesus in these words, what God has brought together, let no one, some of us remember it by put asunder, but others it's separate.

The emphasis here is actually on union and no restricting, actually, opportunities for divorce. This is something that God is bringing together.

[16:48] Well, divorce fails to accept and appreciate that God is the reason that two become one in this union with a portion of the Spirit. So Malachi encourages us, then, twice, to guard ourselves, guard yourselves, he says, in your spirit.

Friends, I want you to leave today taking two things, taking broken faith, taking shattered trust, trust, and divorce seriously.

But even more, when you leave here today, what I really want you to take seriously is just how much God honors faithfulness. Those who've married, those who've never married, or maybe those who were once married.

Closing, let me just kind of make three applications to this. First, for the married, second, for the single, and then finally, for those who are divorced. For those of you who are married, marriage, actually for all of us, it's a picture of God's relationship with us in covenant.

Marriage is for holiness and unity and procreation and pleasure and companionship. But it's also an act of worship and witness to the world in which we live in.

[18:07] I know that there are times that it's really difficult and delightful. It's painful and pleasurable and always requires the grace of God to remain faithful to Him and to our spouse through the mercy and kindness and courage of Jesus Christ.

Let me say this. I think that we do a pretty good job at St. John's of supporting marriages, but I know that we can do a lot better. I want to commit myself to that with you. It's for the married people.

The singles. This is difficult to hear, I know. Not just what I'm about to say and I don't want to be trite, but I know that it's difficult to hear about marriage and be here as a single person.

But without being trite, let me remind you that our Lord was single. He was tempted in every way. I'm sorry that the church has sometimes put you in singles groups.

I'm glad that our church doesn't do that. I'm also sorry that sometimes married couples have not included you into their life. But I'm really thankful for a number of the married couples here who do include singles in their life.

[19:25] And let me say that I don't think they include you in because you're single. I think they include you in because they like you. And I'm really thankful for the singles who include themselves in the life of married couples.

And I know that you too like them. Don't include yourself in those relationships because you like the couple, although I hope you do, but you like the members that are in that marriage.

That's the first thing. The second thing, we've had a baptism today. This is for singles, which is a sign of God's covenant with his people. And the only reason that marriage isn't one of our sacraments in the Anacan tradition is because it's not a command.

It's not, you must be married where baptism and communion are. We must be baptized and we must receive communion. That's not the same with marriage.

That being the case though, let me suggest this, I think, that both baptism and holy communion are about the holiness and union, unity with God.

[20:34] And so God's presence is made real to us through that and so I encourage you to press in to baptism, press in to your union with Christ through communion.

Finally, then in closing, divorced. I'm sorry for the church's failure to support you in your marriage and our failure to support you through your divorce, in the middle of your divorce, and after your divorce.

I'm sorry about that. I know that there are lots of supports in this world for marriage and through divorce. There are good counselors. There's good pastoral care.

There are good resources as well. I know, but I think that we can do more. If you're someone, if you're someone here today or you know someone else who's going through divorce, let me just

encourage you or encourage them to take the opportunity to learn about divorce care.

We have that here at St. John's and even this fall, we're going to be having a divorce care for kids as well in collaboration with the Oak Ridge Adventist Church. It's absolutely critical this ministry is in caring for people who are going through divorce.

[ 21 : 50 ] But I don't want to leave you with that this morning. The last thing that I want to share with you just is to be completely aware and embrace God's faithfulness in your life and our response and His call.

That's what this is. It is a call to faithfulness with faithfulness to Jesus Christ. When I was celebrating, when I was officiating at weddings in the past, I used to open my wedding sermons with this following quote.

Many of you will actually know about this. Some of you won't just because of your age and stage of life, but Neil Armstrong, who was the first man to land on the moon, when he landed on the moon, his first words back to earth were, do you know?

Well, everyone thinks that he said it was one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind, but actually, he said, Houston, the eagle, has landed.

But his second words when he actually set foot on the moon were one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind. And I think that's what marriage is like. It's one small step for a man and a woman, but one giant leap for mankind.

[ 23 : 15 ] Our marriages are not just about us. They're not just private. They're public too. And I know you're saying, but wait a minute, James, I spent a lot of money and a lot of time and a lot of emotion just to take that initial step.

It took a lot for me. But I think we all know that it takes even more to see our marriages, to support marriages, and to support the church in this so that it's an act of faithfulness.

We see that in response to the faithfulness of our Lord. I speak to you in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.