

Worship Worthy of the Lord Malachi I

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I The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel by Malachi.

² “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 ³ but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.” ⁴ If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” the LORD of hosts says, “They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called ‘the wicked country,’ and ‘the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.’” ⁵ Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, “Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!”

⁶ “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. But you say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ ⁷ 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. ⁸ 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 you favor? says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ And now entreat the favor of God, that he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favor to any of you? says the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ 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. ¹¹ For 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. ¹² But you profane it when you say that the Lord’s table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food may be despised. ¹³ 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. ¹⁴ 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.

- Malachi I, ESV

I remember meeting the mayor of Gananoque, Ontario, Canada, many years ago. We were with our church youth group doing a mission trip there, and the mayor invited us to his house for a cookout and a pool party. I was talking to him, and I asked him how I should address him properly, would it be “Mr. Mayor” or “Your Honor” and he told me, “Actually, the proper honorific title for mayors in Canada is ‘Your Worship.’” I wasn’t sure how to respond to him, as I wasn’t sure at first if he was serious or not, and once I realized he was, I think I said something about how that would never go over well in America.

What is worship, and why do people throughout the British Commonwealth call not only mayors but also local magistrates “Your Worship”? Well, it may be helpful to know that the French-Canadian equivalent term “Ton Honneur,” or “Your Honor.” “Worship” is based on an older English word, worth-ship, so “Your Worth-ship”

and indicates someone who is worthy of special honor. In this case, not all worship is the same, but the more worthy someone is, the higher and better the worth-ship or honor due them.

This issue of honor and worship is front-and-center here in Malachi 1, as it is clear that the returning residents of Jerusalem are more ready and eager to give proper honor to their governors than they are to the Lord, and this is a major problem.

I. Worthless Worship

God had evaluated the worship of His people at the restored Temple in Jerusalem, and He had declared that their worship of Him was completely worthless. In fact, He goes so far in verse 10 as to say, *“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.”*

So, what made their worship so unacceptable, so utterly worthless? Well, at the heart of it, it just wasn't honoring to God. Their focus was not on how worthy God is, but was on themselves, on offering to God whatever is cheap and convenient, instead of honoring God properly according to His Word.

a. Cheap

God's Law required His people to offer to Him the firstborn males of their flocks; firstborn male donkeys could be redeemed with a lamb, but other firstborn male livestock were to be sacrifices to the Lord. To do so is a costly act of faith; the firstborn male was valuable, and sacrificing it demonstrated faith in God to provide for His people.

Furthermore, God's law forbid offering to the Lord any animal that was blind or lame. In Leviticus 22:18-22, God says:

When any one of the house of Israel or of the sojourners in Israel presents a burnt offering as his offering, for any of their vows or freewill offerings that they offer to the LORD, ¹⁹ if it is to be accepted for you it shall be a male without blemish, of the bulls or the sheep or the goats. ²⁰ You shall not offer anything that has a blemish, for it will not be acceptable for you. ²¹ And when anyone offers a sacrifice of peace offerings to the LORD to fulfill a vow or as a freewill offering from the herd or from the flock, to be accepted it must be perfect; there shall be no blemish in it. ²² Animals blind or disabled or mutilated or having a discharge or an itch or scabs you shall not offer to the LORD or give them to the LORD as a food offering on the altar. (ESV)

The sacrifices had to be spotless because they were symbols of Jesus, the perfect lamb of God and firstborn Son of God, who would come and offer Himself for the sins of His people.

Instead of keeping their vows to obey God's law and offer up their firstborn males, these Israelites would choose a blind or lame or otherwise deformed animal from their flocks – one they wouldn't want to see reproduce and one that was not as valuable at market – and they would offer these instead. The priests knew this is what the people were doing, but they accepted these inferior animals from them anyway.

b. Convenient

In addition to cost, the people and the priests were worried about convenience. They wanted to do what was easy, and they didn't see what the big deal was. They weren't thinking that they were dishonoring God's name. They were just making minor adjustments that would be easier for them.

From the priests' perspective, imagine the problems it would cause for them if they rejected the sacrifices people brought. Many of these people were pilgrims who had travelled to Jerusalem with their families to make the sacrifice. The firstborn male was probably kept back at home. Would they really ask people to travel all the way back home to get the proper animal? What a pain! What a hassle! This is why Malachi has the priest saying '*What a weariness this is*' in verse 13.

By Jesus' day, the Temple leadership had come up with an ingenious solution: They offered animals for sale at the Temple itself, where they could keep an eye on quality control. They made sure these animals were not blind or lame, and they charged enough money for them that they could ensure they were appropriately costly to the worshipers. It would seem they had solved all of the problems identified by Malachi here. But Jesus drove out the animal sellers, because the whole system was one of corruption based on convenience.

2. Worthy is the Lord

Interestingly, the place where God begins is not with the cheap and convenient nature of their worthless worship. Rather, He begins with His great love for His people and His own worthiness of truly honorable worship as their God and Father. Before He addresses the weakness and worthlessness of their worship, He reaffirms His love for them, reminds them of His sovereign choice of them to be His own, and affirms that they will see His hand at work for them with their own eyes, so that they will declare: "*Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!*"

And then He says to them: "*A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name.*"

a. He Loves us and Has Saved Us

We have a vitally important principle here: Our worship cannot be fixed from the outside in, but it must come from the inside out. It begins with an understanding that God loves us, that in love He chose us to be His, and that He has saved us and is saving us. Many people have attempted to prescribe dress codes, rituals, procedures, etc. to try to "fix" worship and make it more reverent and God-honoring. These are about as helpful as treating cancer with band-aids. We need a heart transformation.

Israel had put away her idols and had rebuilt the Temple, but her worship was worthless to God, because of her heart.

b. He is our Father

Once we understand that God loves us, has chosen us, and has saved and is saving us, we then need to see the honor God is due as our Father and as our King and Master.

Fathers are worthy of honor because they give life to their children. Children owe their fathers their lives, and they should know that their fathers love them and are teaching them wisdom for their good. Therefore, children should honor their fathers.

God is our Father. He has given us life, even more so than our earthly fathers. He also instructs us and corrects us in loving wisdom. In Hebrews 12, we're told to receive the discipline of the Lord as the expression of His love –

³ Consider him who endured from sinners such hostility against himself, so that you may not grow weary or fainthearted. ⁴ In your struggle against sin you have not yet resisted to the point of shedding your blood. ⁵ And have you forgotten the exhortation that addresses you as sons?

*“My son, do not regard lightly the discipline of the Lord,
nor be weary when reprovved by him.*

*⁶ For the Lord disciplines the one he loves,
and chastises every son whom he receives.”*

⁷ It is for discipline that you have to endure. God is treating you as sons. For what son is there whom his father does not discipline? ⁸ If you are left without discipline, in which all have participated, then you are illegitimate children and not sons. ⁹ Besides this, we have had earthly fathers who disciplined us and we respected them. Shall we not much more be subject to the Father of spirits and live? ¹⁰ For they disciplined us for a short time as it seemed best to them, but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness. ¹¹ For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it. (ESV)

We may not think of it this way, but one of the things God does for us in worship is discipline us. He speaks His truth to us and calls us to repentance and faith and renewed obedience. We can sigh with the priests Malachi is addressing and say, “*What a weariness this is!*” or we can receive the Lord’s instruction, correction, and training in righteousness as the discipline of a loving and all-wise Heavenly Father, who is worthy of infinitely greater honor than the best earthly father, even as He is infinitely more wise and loving than the best earthly father.

c. He is our King/Master

Not only is God our Father, but He is also our King and Master, our Lord. If God is worthy of honor as our Father, He says He is worthy of fear as our Master. Now, you’d be hard-pressed to find two more unpopular words in contemporary American culture than “fear” and “Master.” We have no concept for how to understand someone who says to us, “I love you” and then says to us, “If I am a Master, where is My fear?” This is why we have such a hard time with right worship. We tend to fall off into the realm of slavish legalism when we hear the words “fear” and “Master,” or else we tend to fall off into the realm of subjective, emotional, entertainment-driven pseudo-Romanticism when we hear the words, “*I have loved you.*”

God loves us and has chosen us to be His own, and He is our Father and our Master, worthy of our honor and fear. Loving reverence, honoring and willing obedience are what should characterize our worship of our Great God and Father.

3. Worthy Worship

So, then, what are the keys to worthy worship which we can glean from this passage? Well, we can see that worthy worship is a matter of the right focus, the right attitude, and the right sacrifice, all according to the right standard.

a. Focus

First of all, the right focus: The priests were more focused on themselves than they were on the Lord. God was calling them back to a focus on Him, especially in how He begins. We are all so prone to focus primarily on ourselves, but we aren't worshipping until our focus is placed on the Lord. When we're thinking about what we like or don't like, how we feel, whether we're comfortable or not, whether things are convenient for us or not, we are being distracted by ourselves and we are not worshipping.

In these times, we need to stop listening to ourselves and we need to start preaching the truth to ourselves. We must stop self-pitying and whining and start calling ourselves to worship, focusing on the attributes and actions of God.

b. Attitude

As we focus on the Lord, we need to then check our attitude. We could be focused on the Lord and still offering Him begrudging, half-hearted worship out of mere duty.

John Newton captures well what our attitude should be if we truly know the Lord. In the last verse of the hymn, "We Were Sinners Once as You Are," Newton writes –

*Our pleasure and our duty,
Though opposite before;
Since we have seen his beauty,
Are joined to part no more:
It is our highest pleasure,
No less than duty's call;
To love him beyond measure,
And serve him with our all.*

It's not that worship is not our duty; it is. It's that the right attitude is to delight in our duty. As a husband, it is my duty to love my wife. As a father, it is my duty to love my children. But my marriage and my parenting would be pretty pathetic and virtually worthless if I did not also delight in loving my wife and my children. If that is true for them, how much more should it be true of God?

c. Sacrifice

And the final element of worthy worship we can glean from this passage is the right sacrifice. So, next week, I expect you all to bring a spotless male lamb, the firstborn of your flocks! No slacking!

Okay, so we have to make some new covenant adjustments here, don't we? We don't bring a blood sacrifice to God anymore. The book of Hebrews, among others, makes it very clear that Jesus' once-for-all sacrifice of Himself on the cross is the perfect blood sacrifice for sin. We no longer have any need for a sin offering of shed blood. But that doesn't mean we aren't called to sacrifice.

We offer up to God a sacrifice of thanksgiving, the fruit of our lips. In fact, here's what Hebrews 13:15-16 says about our sacrifices that we offer –

Through him then let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. ¹⁶ Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God. (ESV)

So, we are to praise God and to do good and to share. These are all thanksgiving and fellowship sacrifices, acknowledgements of what God has done for us, has given us, and has called us to be and to do.

Romans 12:1-2 takes the call to sacrifice still further and deeper:

I appeal to you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. ² Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect. (ESV)

Our bodies and our lives are not to be blood sacrifices for sin, but they are to be living sacrifices of thanksgiving and praise.

If we understand these passages rightly, our worship of God is rooted in our gathered worship on the Lord's Day morning, but it extends to every area of our lives.

d. According to the Right Standard

Finally, our focus and attitude and sacrifice have to be according to the right standard – that is, according to the Word of God. Right intentions are not enough. The actions we take based on right intentions have to be guided by God's Word. The Israelites in Malachi's day not only had a poor attitude, but they also blatantly ignored the clear standard of God's word. God tells us in His word how we are to worship Him rightly – with Scripture and song, with the reading and preaching of the Word, with tithes and offerings, and with prayer and confession of our faith. The Word of God must provide the standard and framework for our worship and our obedience, but our worship and obedience must be from the heart in loving devotion.

Worship-Driven Missions

We need to see one final thing in Malachi 1, and that is the missions emphasis in worship. Three times in this opening chapter of Malachi, God calls to His people to a world-wide perspective, in verses 5, 11 & 14:

v. 5: Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!"

v. 11: *For 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.*

v. 14: *For I am a great King, says the LORD of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.*

For the church, our worship should remind us of how great God is and of His kingdom vision for the nations. Thus, worship should fuel missions, but not because missions is the ultimate thing, but rather because worship is. John Piper explains it this way in the opening of his great book on missions, *Let the Nations Be Glad*:

“Missions is not the ultimate goal of the church. Worship is. Missions exists because worship doesn’t. Worship is ultimate, not missions, because God is ultimate, not man. When this age is over, and the countless millions of the redeemed fall on their faces before the throne of God, missions will be no more. It is a temporary necessity. But worship abides forever. So worship is the fuel and goal of missions.”

Our worship should motivate us to pursue missions, so that people from every tribe, tongue, people and nation will gather with us in worship, and so that God’s name will indeed be great among all the nations.