

“Marriage”

Malachi 2:10-16

Pastor Jason Van Bommel

¹⁰ Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?¹¹ Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god.¹² May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!

¹³ And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. ¹⁴ But you say, “Why does he not?” Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

- Malachi 2:10-16, ESV

What is Treachery?

When I say the word “treachery,” what image pops into your mind? Do you picture a sinister spy gathering dark intel and passing it along to covert operatives in a dark alley at night? Perhaps you think of Benedict Arnold, betraying the American cause by attempting to smuggle the plans for West Point to the British, in a covert plan to surrender his new command post into enemy hands? Or perhaps you think of the great treachery of Brutus when he stabbed Julius Caesar on the Ides of March.

What does treachery have to do with our passage?

Five times in the ESV rendering of today's passage of seven verses, we see the word “faithless” –

v. 10 - ? *Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?*

v. 11 - *Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem.*

v. 14 - *the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.*

v. 15 - *So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.*

v. 16 – repeating the command/warning of verse 15 - *So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.*

In the King James Version and in the New American Standard, the word which the ESV translates as “faithless” is rendered “treacherous,” and that older English word is probably better at picking up on the insidious shade of meaning in this word. It means literally “to cover over,” meaning to act covertly and

fraudulently; to deal deceitfully; to deal treacherously or unfaithfully. It's a dark word, and it casts a long shadow over our text today.

It is also a word with a loaded double-meaning, when we understand marriage ceremonies in ancient Israel. When a man married a woman, he would spread his cloak over her, taking her under his cloak as a sign of protection and care. Yet the way the men of Judah and Jerusalem were dealing with their wives twisted the covering they were supposed to extend to their wives in love into a covering of their actions and attitudes with deceitful unfaithfulness – in other words, with treachery.

So, what were these men doing that was so very bad, and what does this passage say to us today about God's purposes for marriage and how we can honor God in our marriages?

I. Unfaithful Marriages

The first way God accuses the men of Judah and Jerusalem of being treacherous is in their choice of brides:

Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts! (vv. 11-12)

We need to be very clear about what the problem was here: The problem is NOT that these women were foreign; this is not a question of ethnicity. For too long, some people used passages like this in the Bible to say that people shouldn't marry people from other ethnic, racial, or national backgrounds. That is NOT what God is condemning here. These men were marrying women who worshipped other gods.

We can see the truth clearly by looking at the difference between Boaz's marriage to Ruth and Solomon's marriages to his foreign, idol-worshipping wives. Ruth was a Moabite, and yet she was a worshipper of God, not an idolater. Her marriage to Boaz was blessed by God and is celebrated in the Book of Ruth.

Solomon married Pharaoh's daughter and then the daughters of other foreign kings to make political alliances for Israel. These wives of Solomon were idol-worshippers, and Solomon set up high places outside Jerusalem for their false gods. By the end of his life, Solomon himself was worshiping these idols, and God judged him by tearing Israel in two during the reign of Solomon's son, Rehoboam. These idols, brought in for Solomon's wives, began a long and sad history of idolatry in Judah. Now, after the exile had finally ended idolatry in Judah, these men were reopening this grave spiritual wound by marrying the daughters of foreign gods.

Today, it's more common for Christian women to marry unbelieving men. Very commonly the Christian woman will "fall in love" with a "wonderful" man who is so perfect in every way, except that he's not a believer. Maybe he has promised not to interfere with her faith and her going to church, and she thinks that's good enough. But God tells believers in both 1 and 2 Corinthians to marry only believers -

A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord. – 1 Cor. 7:39

Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. For what partnership has righteousness with lawlessness? Or what fellowship has light with darkness? What accord has Christ with Belial? Or what portion does a believer share with an unbeliever? What agreement has the temple of God with idols? – 2 Cor. 6:14-16

Now, really, believers don't need any other reason but the plain written word of God to know that it is forbidden to marry an unbeliever. The plain reading of God's word should be enough to remove this option from consideration, and the best way to not marry an unbeliever is to never enter into a romantic relationship with an unbeliever.

But let me take a minute to explain why God forbids this kind of marriage: As a husband or wife, you have taken a vow and you have a deep obligation and commitment to your spouse. You become one flesh, your lives intertwined and inseparable. If your spouse is an unbeliever, you cannot pray together, seeking the Lord together, or study the Bible together or truly worship together. Your spiritual growth as a believer and your marriage to your spouse will both be strained deeply because your heart will be torn in two different directions

But let me take a minute to explain why God forbids this kind of marriage: As a husband or wife, you have taken a vow and you have a deep obligation and commitment to your spouse. You become one flesh, your lives intertwined and inseparable. If your spouse is an unbeliever, you cannot pray together, seeking the Lord together, or study the Bible together or worship together. Your spiritual growth as a believer and your marriage to your spouse will both be strained deeply because your heart will be torn in two different directions. You will either quit growing in your faith or you will grow distant from your spouse. And this is without mentioning children. How will you raise children with someone who does not worship God? How will you keep the commands of God to raise your children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord?

Now, if you are already married to an unbeliever, the Bible tells you to remain committed to your marriage, to pray for your spouse, to love and serve them. The fact that someone is an unbeliever is a good reason not to begin a marriage with them, but it is not a good reason to end a marriage with them.

2. Unfaithfulness in Marriage

But the problem with marriages in Malachi's day was not just a matter of God's people marrying idol-worshippers. God was also angry because of the way the men of Judah and Jerusalem were treating their wives –

And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. ¹⁴ But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. ¹⁵ Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ¹⁶ "For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."

If you combine this complaint with the first one, an even more troubling picture emerges: The men of Judah and Jerusalem weren't just marrying idol-worshipping women, but they were divorcing their wives in order to marry younger, prettier idol-worshipping women. God expresses disgust with these men who essentially traded in their wives for younger models, not caring about the covenant vows they made before God to their wives or whether or not their new wives were worshipping the true God or idols.

Listen to how God expresses this -

1. He declares that He will not hear the prayers of these men, even though they cover His altar with tears – *“he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand”*
2. Then, He says why. He says He is the witness between these men and their wives – *“the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.”*

This language from Malachi 2 is echoed by the Apostle Peter in 1 Peter 3:7: *“Likewise, husbands, live with your wives in an understanding way, showing honor to the woman as the weaker vessel, since they are heirs with you of the grace of life, so that your prayers may not be hindered.”* When husbands fail to love and honor their wives, living with them in an understanding way, God takes it very seriously. He is the covenantal witness, and the prayers of men who abuse, neglect, or abandon their wives are hindered; God turns a deaf ear to men who turn a deaf ear to their wives.

The language of Malachi 2 is a reminder that marriage is a sacred covenant relationship, entered into in the presence of God, who is the primary witness to the covenant, who upholds the marriage bond and holds us accountable to keeping our vows.

The idea of God as the covenantal witness is key to biblical covenant commitments:

In Ruth 1, Ruth makes a sacred covenant vow to Naomi, her mother-in-law, and she expresses her commitment in the strongest possible terms:

Ruth said, “Do not urge me to leave you or to return from following you. For where you go I will go, and where you lodge I will lodge. Your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die I will die, and there will I be buried. May the LORD do so to me and more also if anything but death parts me from you.” – Ruth 1:16-17, ESV

What we can see from this passage very clearly is that all of life matters to God. The people who had returned and settled in Jerusalem and Judea after the exile to Babylon had figured out that they should not worship idols. They thought if they affirmed the right truth – that YaHWeH alone was the one, true God – and if they put away their idols, this would be good enough, But God wants our hearts, and if He has our hearts, He will have our lives.

Many people profess to be Christians and go to church, but if you're just going through then motions in worship, with a cold, listless, lukewarm, bored attitude, and if you rarely if ever think about God or seek Him outside of Sunday morning worship, does He really have your heart? If He does not have your heart and your life, if He really your God? For married people, the way we treat our marriages and our

spouses is a key reflection of whether or not we actually possess the faith we profess, whether we're just giving God lip-service or whether He truly has our hearts.

God's language in verse 16 is very strong, but it is also very difficult to translate accurately:

"For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. – ESV

For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. – NASB

"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. - NIV

For the Lord, the God of Israel, saith that he hateth putting away: for one covereth violence with his garment, saith the Lord of hosts – KJV

The question is whether God is condemning men who hate their wives or is saying that He hates divorce. It's not clear which translation is better, but either way, it's clear that God has a very low view of men who disregard and divorce their wives.

Later Jesus expressed a strong view of marriage and very low view of divorce, in Matthew 19:4-9 –

Pharisees came up to him and tested him by asking, "Is it lawful to divorce one's wife for any cause?"⁴ He answered, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female,⁵ and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh?'⁶ So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate."⁷ They said to him, "Why then did Moses command one to give a certificate of divorce and to send her away?"⁸ He said to them, "Because of your hardness of heart Moses allowed you to divorce your wives, but from the beginning it was not so. ⁹ And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery." (ESV)

3. God's Purposes in Marriage

One of the things we need to do as we translate this teaching from its ancient world context to our contemporary context is to acknowledge that God speaks almost exclusively to men in this passage about the way they choose their wives and treat their wives because, in the ancient world, men had 100% of the power and control in marriage. Men chose their wives, and men chose when to divorce their wives. Women had very limited say in the matter, except as much as they were able to convince their fathers to not give consent to the marriage.

God did put protections in place for women. God's opposition to divorce provided a stronger security and protection for women, who were left powerless in the world if they were abandoned by their husbands.

Today, women have more equality, and that extends to divorce as well as the choice of a spouse in marriage, so we need to take these teachings aimed at men and apply them to women as well. To do so accurately, we need to better understand God's purposes for marriage:

1. **Marriage is a sacred covenant which God establishes between men and women made in His image.** The passage begins with a reference to God as the Father and Creator of all. Marriage is something which God created in the beginning with the first man and woman as a reflection of His image in them.
2. **Marriage reflects God's image in two ways: in love and in fatherhood.** In the loving covenantal relationship between husband and wife, we have a dim reflection of both the loving relationship between the persons or the triune Godhead and of the loving committed relationship God makes with His own people. And also, in creating children, marriage gives an opportunity to reflect the loving fatherhood of God in the way we parent our children.
3. **Thus, marriages are ordinarily designed by God to produce children and marriages between believers to produce holy children.** Because we live in a fallen world marred by sickness and brokenness, many couples have a hard time having children, but having children should be the normal expectation of married couples. Again, verse 15 – “*Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring.*”
4. **The offspring of believers are holy, Godly offspring.** I Corinthians 7:14 calls the children of even a single believing parent – of the union of a believer and an unbeliever – holy children, meaning they are covenantally set apart by God and for God. This is why we baptize the children of believers. Malachi 2:15 calls them Godly offspring and I Corinthians 7:14 calls them holy children.
5. **Divorce is a terrible, tragic tearing apart of what should be a lifelong, unbroken, absolute commitment.** God does allow for divorce in cases of adultery and abandonment – and I believe that abuse is a form of abandonment. However, just because God allows for divorce doesn't mean it's a good thing.

How is This Possible!

So, marriage is meant to reflect God's character, but how? After all, even a marriage between two believers is a union between two sinners. Yes, we are sinners saved by grace and born again by the Holy Spirit, but we remain selfish sinners still. So, how is it possible for us to fulfill God's purposes for marriage?

Verses 15-16 give us the answer in two things: a tremendous blessing and a repeated charge:

Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. 16 “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

The Lord blesses Christian couples with the presence of the Holy Spirit in their union, and by the power of the Holy Spirit we are charged to guard ourselves in our spirits. In other words, the Lord Himself is the heart of the Christian marriage, and Christians must guard themselves by the power of the Holy Spirit, keeping the Lord central in their marriage and being on the alert for the treacherous power of sin. We become treacherous in our marriages when we allow sin to work its treachery in our hearts. But God will guard us as we guard ourselves in His power.