

How have we wearied you?

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[0 : 0 0] Malachi chapter 2 verse 10. 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?

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.

As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him from the tents of Jacob, even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty. Another thing you do, you flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. You ask why? 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 one God made you? 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. 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 have wearied the Lord with your words. How have we wearied him, you ask? By saying all who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord and he is pleased with them. Or where is the God of justice? I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, said the Lord Almighty. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver. He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness. And the offerings of Judah and Jerusalem will be acceptable to the Lord, as in days gone by, as in former years. So I will come to put you on trial. I will be quick to testify against sorcerers, adulterers, and perjurers, against those who defraud laborers of their wages, who oppress the widows and the fatherless, and deprive the foreigners among you of justice.

But do not fear me, says the Lord Almighty. I, the Lord, do not change. So you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the Lord Almighty. But you ask, how are we to return? Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me. But you ask, how are we robbing you?

[3 : 0 7] In tithes and offerings, you are under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven, and pour out so much blessing, that there will be, there will not be room enough to store it. I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it is ripe, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours, yours will be a delightful land, says the Lord Almighty. This is the word of the Lord.

Thanks, Erlene, for reading. Do keep that passage open, if you would, Malachi chapter 3, and you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful as we look at this together.

So, I was talking to a friend last week, and he said, what are you preaching on? And I said, Malachi chapter 3, and he said, oh, your church treasurer will be pleased with it being about tithing. And I heard this story last week of two men who get shipwrecked on a desert island. They shipwreck, they arrive on this desert island, and the first one starts screaming, we're going to die, we're doomed, there's no food, there's no water, we're going to die. And the second one just casually sits down and rests against a palm tree. And the first guy says, don't you understand the seriousness of this? We're going to die. And the second guy says, you don't understand, I earn a hundred thousand pounds a week. And the first man looks at him, dumbfounded, and says, what difference is that going to make? We've got no food, we've got no water. And the second man says, no, you don't understand, I make a hundred thousand pounds a week, and I tithe ten percent of that. My pastor will find us. So anyway, this passage looks at marriage and divorce and tithing, and it's easy, therefore, to think it's just a set of do's and don'ts, and quite a long one, actually. It's quite a long bit of the Bible to be looking at. But fundamentally, it's not about what we're to do and not to do.

It's about the character of God, and about what happens when his people forget what he is like. A reminder, Malachi was written about 500 years before Jesus was born. It's the last book in the Old Testament, a great book to look at in the build-up to Christmas. But the people had forgotten that God loves them, and so they were giving God second best. They don't start being all-out immoral, but they're being half-hearted towards God. And so in Malachi, God's people are urged to return to God, to turn back to him. And maybe we, in Advent, could be using Malachi ourselves for self-examination and just be thinking with God and to God, how do we need to return to him? Where have we forgotten his love for us or stop trusting that and in that doubt harbored sin that we can just bring back to him and turn away? So in this section, a lot of it's negative, and we do need to look at the negatives.

But there are these contrasts as well between the people and God, and the things that we hear about God are very positive things. So we'll look at those together. So the first contrast in the text is between God's faithfulness and their fickleness. And we see his faithfulness in chapter 3, verse 6, if you have a look at that. I, the Lord, do not change, so you, the descendants of Jacob, are not destroyed. God had made promises to Jacob, their forefather. Abraham was his grandfather.

[6 : 56] And God is absolutely committed to those promises. So because they are the sons of Jacob, they can be assured. When God promises something, it will happen. And God promised to Abraham and to Jacob, he will have a kingdom, a kingdom of God's people living in God's place, God's way, enjoying his blessing. And that commitment is irrevocable. And that's hugely encouraging for us because we, as the church today, stand on that promise as well. And we can look around Scotland today, and you just walk around the West End, don't you walk from St. Silas around the West End, and you see lots of old church buildings that are being used for other things now.

And the Church of Scotland is in incredibly rapid decline. The Scottish Episcopal Church, that we're a member of, is in very rapid decline as well. But though a denomination might come under God's judgment for a time, and God might stop using that denomination, we can be fully confident that God will still build his church because he's promised it. He will always have a church because he keeps his promises. It's hugely encouraging for us to remember that.

But that faithfulness of God to his commitments should make us as his people faithful in our commitments. And in Malachi's time, instead, God looks and sees infidelity. And we see it in two different ways connected with marriage. Now, we haven't really got time to look in full detail at what God is saying here. This isn't the Bible's only word on marriage. So we were just suggesting before the service, we're going to have a Q&A.; You can text your questions in. So we will give some time if the things that people feel are unresolved you want to ask about. There may be nothing, but if you'd like to do that, we can do that. But just looking at the two ways that people have been unfaithful to each other and to God, the first one is that some of the men had married women who didn't believe in God. That is, they worshiped different gods to the God of the Bible. And so you see that in chapter 2, verse 11. 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. So in the Old Testament, it's clearly forbidden for God's people in the Old Testament to marry somebody outside the fellowship of believers. And the primary reason that that command was given was because it would pull people's hearts away from him if they marry people who didn't worship him. And we see examples of it going horribly wrong. King Solomon is an example of that, who makes such a great start as king, and then it goes tragically wrong. And it's partly because he couldn't say no to a woman or to lots of women. So he ends up with these hundreds of wives and hundreds of concubines. And they worship other gods, and it draws his heart away from God.

Just as these guys, they've married people who don't worship the living God, and it desecrates the sanctuary. It's quite strong language, isn't it? It drew their heart away from being wholehearted disciples. So God sees it as an act of faithlessness towards him and the people.

[10:27] Then God gives a related reason in verse 15, if you look down there, why he doesn't want that to happen. He says, has not the one God made you, you belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So one of the reasons that God seeks marriages where both husband and wife are believers is that it's so much better for the children to grow up not just thinking, oh, one parent thinks this and the other parent thinks that, but to grow up in a home where the Lord Jesus, well, at this time, Yahweh and his promises are followed by both parents. So that's the first mark here of people being unfaithful to God and his people. And the second mark is that these men who'd married these unbelievers, they'd already been married before. So in verse 14, they get upset that God isn't answering their prayers. And in verse 14, you ask why? 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. And then verse 16 is very strong, isn't it? 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.

So this is difficult, isn't it? And it's worth saying it's not the only word the Bible has to say about marriage. Christians disagree about marriage and divorce and remarriage. For my money, in the New Testament, there are two very limited situations in which divorce is permissible for a Christian. So this passage is not saying that divorce is never allowed for a Christian. But the grounds that are given in the New Testament for divorce are meant to be exceptions to the normal pattern that Christian marriage is a lifelong commitment of faithfulness to one another, that by that faithfulness adorns the faithfulness of God to the world.

And we shouldn't be surprised to hear that God hates divorce. Because I don't know about you, but when I speak to friends who are divorced, or friends whose parents have been divorced, and they've lived through that, none of them would say really anything other than that divorce was a horrible thing to go through. Marriage breakdown is a horrible thing. But God's priority here of fidelity challenges us to uphold marriage wherever we possibly can. If we're single, to uphold marriage in our behavior and to either stay single or to marry wisely. And if we're married, to invest well in our marriage.

I've got a friend who's been, he's about 15 or 20 years older than me and has been in ministry that period longer than me. And he was talking to me last week about how he, about 25 years ago, him and eight friends, a little fraternal of nine ministers, set up a group together. And then from that, they've joined, other people have joined that group and they've planted churches and so on.

But last week, one of those original nine in his fraternal told the others that he's leaving his wife. And my friend's very discouraged by that. But he also said to me that of those original nine church ministers, that's the fourth guy in the last 25 years whose marriage has broken down.

[14 : 06] It's very discouraging. But he said to me, we shouldn't be surprised because just look at the churches, look at the congregations. It's a tragedy reflected across so many churches.

So we have to invest in marriages, husbands investing in loving your wives, wives in loving your husbands. And if you're not getting on brilliantly well with your spouse, don't be too proud to tell other people and get help.

And if you're beyond caring about help and putting the marriage right, then remember the faithfulness of God. It's because God keeps his promises to us that we in turn ought to be concerned to keep our promises to other people.

The promises we made when we got married, for better, for worse, in sickness and in health, for richer, for poorer. Because he is a promise keeper, he calls us to keep our word to one another.

So that's our first contrast between God's faithfulness and their fickleness. The second one is between God's generosity and their stinginess. If you look with me at chapter 3, verse 8, we'll come back to the middle section at the end.

[15 : 21] So chapter 3, verse 8. Will a mere mortal rob God, yet you rob me? But you ask, how are we robbing you?

In tithes and offerings, you are under a curse, your whole nation, because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.

So the Old Testament commanded the people to give a tenth of what they earned to God. And they were holding it back in Malachi's time. But just think about that phrase that God uses in verse 8.

God says, you are robbing me. Isn't that an extraordinary thing to say? I don't know if you remember this, but... And it may even still happen.

I don't know. I've not been to the cinema for a long time. But when I used to go to the cinema, there were adverts to stop you pirating, stop you filming the film and selling DVDs of the film illegally.

[16 : 23] And so the way they were doing it was trying to help people's mentality to see that that was theft. And so they had this advert running for years. And it would say, you wouldn't steal a car. And it would show a guy running up to a car and breaking in.

And then it would say, you wouldn't steal a handbag. And it showed a girl sitting at a restaurant table with her handbag on the back of the chair. And a guy walking up and just swiping it away. And then it said, you wouldn't steal a DVD.

And it showed a guy walking down a supermarket aisle and just grabbing a DVD and putting it in his pocket. And then it would say, piracy is theft. Very effective.

And that's what God does here. Helping us see, holding things back from him for what it really is. Most of us here, I guess, would find it pretty unthinkable that we would see someone not paying attention to their handbag.

And we just think, oh, I'll have that and take it away. See what's in it for myself. Or to break into a house and steal a laptop. But God says to these people who are not giving their full tithe, you're robbing me.

[17 : 30] You're robbing my house. Because they don't give him what he's entitled to. And it's very sobering because when you think, well, what are we as New Testament believers to give to God?

In 1 Corinthians 6, it says, you are not your own. You were bought with a price. So he owns all of us. And when we don't acknowledge that, it's daylight robbery.

Now, tithing was a specific command in the Old Testament. The New Testament never repeats that command about giving 10% of what you earn. And instead, the New Testament gives us principles to think about when we're giving, when we're spending our money and giving our money.

And that covers when we're giving to support gospel work, which would be primarily through our local church, but perhaps supporting mission partners and friends as well. Giving to help the poor and meet the needs of other people.

So our financial giving is to be generous. It should be sacrificial. That is that we should be careful.

[18 : 37] That is that we should be aware of ways that we feel a sacrifice of there are things that we can't do or we're not doing or don't have because of what we're giving financially to God. Our giving should be sensible.

So you don't give in a way that runs up massive debt. It should be voluntary that you should each make up in your own heart, your own mind about what you give.

And it should be out of what you have, not about what you don't have. And it should be cheerful. God loves cheerful giving. God loves giving. So whereas in the Old Testament there was this 10% figure, I want to say that when you look at the New Testament teaching, for some of us, giving 10% of what we earn to gospel work would be too much.

We can't afford that. And it wouldn't be right for us to give that. And we shouldn't feel burdened by that 10% if that's the situation we're in. And for others of us, living in a time and a place where we have so much, giving 10% is far too little.

And how we spend our money says a great deal about our hearts. There was a German theologian, Helmut Thilicker, who said that our wallets have more to do with heaven and hell than our hymn books.

[19 : 54] And I heard recently about a man who was writing a biography of somebody. And he said that the key thing to get the measure of the man he was writing about was to see his check stubs.

He said, once I saw the check stubs, I knew the man. He knew what drove him. It's worth saying we have to be very careful not to judge each other when we think about that.

Some of the most generous Christians that I know happen to drive nice cars. And it's very dangerous to look at somebody else's lifestyle and be judgmental of them and think, oh, they can't be giving enough.

So be careful about judging others, but be very serious about judging yourself. And really thinking, how is my heart towards money? Am I really being generous and sacrificial towards God in my giving?

But why would we give? Well, there we get this contrast between their stinginess and look at verse 10 and God's generosity.

[20 : 56] Chapter 3, verse 10. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse that there may be food in my house. Test me in this, says the Lord Almighty, and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it.

I will prevent pests from devouring your crops, and the vines in your fields will not drop their fruit before it's ripe, says the Lord Almighty. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for yours will be a delightful land.

As we're saying, this has got nothing to do with the prosperity gospel here. In the Old Testament, the blessing of God was tied in with the promised land that Israel had been given.

And so naturally, in the normal course of events, if you were blessed by God in Old Testament times, you would have seen material prosperity. You'd have seen good harvests and wealth.

And as we look at that through the lens of Christ, you don't bring that forward to now. Some churches want to claim those promises today and say, well, if you give to your church, God will make you rich materially.

[22 : 03] And that's not true. That's a lie. Even in the Old Testament, that wasn't always true. So we see in examples of sometimes people's poverty is not caused by their unfaithfulness.

It's caused by a time of testing, like Job, or it's caused by persecution. And we also see in the Old Testament examples of where wealth has come not from blessing from God for faithfulness, but rather from corruption in places like Psalm 73.

So it wasn't always there anywhere in the Old Testament. But in the New Testament, we do see promises about blessing coming to people who are generous in their financial giving.

And it's worth unpacking where we think that blessing comes. So blessing not necessarily in material wealth today, but in treasure being stored up in heaven for us.

Jesus is saying, don't store up treasures on earth, but treasure in heaven, that we will have an inheritance there. And in some way, some mysterious way, our inheritance in heaven is tied in with our obedience on earth.

[23 : 10] Another way that we are blessed when we give our money is that God uses that to liberate us from the chains of money. If you're worried about loving money too much, the best thing you can do is give it away.

And then God liberates you to focus your eyes on him for satisfaction instead of money. But we should also expect, I think, that God looks after us when we take a step of faith and are more generous towards him.

Because in 2 Corinthians 9, which is part of the biggest section in the whole New Testament about giving, there's this promise to give us. It says, you will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God.

So you see the idea, God's seeing someone's generosity towards him and looking to enrich them in every way so that they can be generous in every way. So normally we don't put God to the test, but here is an invitation to test him.

In chapter 3, verse 10 of Malachi, test me in this. And I don't know if you've ever seen the floodgates open somewhere. I was just watching this film last week, San Andreas.

[24 : 25] It's a disaster movie. Have you seen San Andreas? It's a great film. But anyway, because it's this disaster movie and there's a big earthquake, there's a point where a dam bursts. And it's so dramatic as all this water, this enormous reservoir of water, comes deluging down the valley as this dam breaks.

And that's the picture that God gives us here of heaven waiting to bursting with blessing, that the floodgates of heaven will be driven open by God to the generous and blessing will be poured out upon them.

It's just a great picture to see to bless God in and claim. So the people in Malachi's time are being stingy and they're being fickle.

And they're being fickle because they've forgotten that God is a faithful God. And they're being stingy because they've forgotten that God is a generous God. And the same dangers are alive for us today.

Every time we sin, it is an act of unbelief. It's because we forget something true about God or we disbelieve something about God to make us sin. And so we need to hear our third contrast, our final point this morning, the contrast between God's justice and their, this evening, God's justice and their short-sighted grumbling.

[25 : 48] So the mistrust of God gets articulated in chapter 2, verse 17. He says, You have weary the Lord with your words. How have we weary him, you ask?

By saying, All who do evil are good in the eyes of the Lord, and he is pleased with them. Or where is the God of justice? So the people look around them and they see good people having bad things happen to them and bad people having good things happen to them.

And it's as though God's justice is topsy-turvy. And they think it's as though God thinks the evil are good and the good are evil. Where's the justice of God? And it's such a contemporary complaint, isn't it, that people have against God.

It's the Radio 4 complaint against God. When something bad happens in the world, when there's tyranny or terrorism, people say, Where's this God that Christians believe in?

How can that God exist and this kind of thing go on today? And so we're vulnerable to that way of thinking, that we see injustice and it gnaws away at us, and then we start to doubt whether God's really there and we become half-hearted towards him.

[26 : 57] So what's the answer? Well, the answer is that that grumbling is short-sighted. And this is what Advent is all about. It's about the coming of the Messiah.

If you have a look with me at chapter 3, verse 1, we see God's answer to that complaint. The Lord says, as they grumble about injustice, the Lord says, I will send my messenger who will prepare the way before me.

Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple. The messenger of the covenant whom you desire will come, says the Lord Almighty. And following that promise, there were five centuries of silence, generation after generation, until Mark chapter 1, when Mark quotes that very verse from Malachi 3.

And he says this, And so John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

That's the messenger, preparing the way for the Lord, God himself, as he comes and heads to the temple. He's the one God's people have been waiting for as they yearn for justice.

[28 : 11] And their situation is so similar to the situation of British people today, Scottish people today, longing for justice, crying out about the wrongdoing in the world.

And yet, shockingly, the great shock in Malachi 3 is that when God's justice comes, those people who wanted it are not actually ready for it. So look at the warning of verse 2.

Have a look with me at verse 2. But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears?

So he comes to judge some, and he comes to purify others. And the judgment comes in verses 5 and 6, and it mentions those who oppress, it mentions those who are greedy, who worship idols.

But what a frightening thought that is, that people around us rage against God, that there's no justice. And they look down on others and think, we need God to come and sort out the tyrants of our world and the wrongdoers of our world.

[29 : 16] And God's answer is, my justice is coming, my Messiah will bring justice, but it will wipe you out. But when true justice comes, we all deserve condemnation.

And that's exactly what we see in Mark's gospel, as that plays out in Jesus' first coming, isn't it? That you've got these religious people who've been waiting for him, and they think, at last the Messiah's here, because he can smite our enemies and vindicate us.

And then Jesus comes to teach them that they have a heart problem he has come to save them from, so that when he goes into the temple, he judges the temple, and they kill him for it.

He comes to judge. But for others, wonderfully, he comes to refine, to purify. In verse 3, he will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver.

He will purify the Levites and refine them like gold and silver. Then the Lord will have men who will bring offerings in righteousness. That's Old Testament language describing the Levites and offerings there, but it's describing, essentially, that God's Messiah will have a people whom he will purify to become the holy people God's redeemed them to be.

[30 : 32] So how do you get to be someone who is refined and purified by God instead of judged and condemned? Well, the answer comes in verse 7 of chapter 3.

Ever since the time of your ancestors, you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you. That's the promise.

It's a gracious promise. No matter how badly you've fallen away or drifted, no matter how conscious you are tonight of ways that you have let God down, this week, the ways that besetting sins have continued to control you, the solution is return to him.

Tonight, just do it tonight, and he will return to you, and you'll stand in his grace. Now, looking into the future from Malachi's perspective, he can see the Messiah coming to judge and to refine and purify, and it looks like that's going to happen at the same time, so that when the Messiah comes, the disciples think it's going to be the end of the world, and those two messianic missions get pulled apart when Jesus arrives, that he has come once to give life, to save a people that he is refining and purifying, and he will come again in glory to judge and bring justice to our world.

So in the meantime, we're invited to return to God, and he will return to us. And above everything else, we're moved to do that when we look at the cross. Just think about why these people were being fickle and unfaithful, because they've forgotten that God is faithful.

[32 : 15] But when we look at the cross, we see a God who, he was so determined to keep his promises, he was willing to endure the shame of dying a criminal's death.

Jesus Christ, the bridegroom, so faithful to his wife, the church, his bride, that he laid down his life to cleanse her from her adultery against him.

And these people were being stingy because they'd forgotten that God is generous. But when we look at the cross, we see the overwhelming generosity of God, a generosity that could never be exhausted as the floodgates of heaven really were opened, and this vast tide of blessing deluges us to wash away our sins.

And these people were grumbling because they'd forgotten that God is committed to justice in his world. And when we look at the cross, we see a God so committed to justice that even for the people he chose to save, his sword of judgment had to fall, and so he endured that sword himself so that we who repent and return to God can go free.

So we look at the cross and we reflect on God's faithfulness, his marvelous generosity, his commitment to justice, and it moves our hearts to return to that kind of a God and live faithfully for him.

[33 : 41] Let's pray together. Just have a moment of quiet to reflect on God's word, and then I'll lead us in a prayer. Father, the Messiah, we praise you that he came to offer life and to refine us, and that one day he will come again to judge the living and the dead.

Father, may we, by your spirit, mindful of your faithfulness, be marked by our fidelity, and mindful of your generosity, be marked by the grace of giving.

For Jesus' name's sake. Amen. Amen.