

How have you loved us?

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Date: 12 November 2017

Preacher: Martin Ayers

[0 : 00] Great thanks. It would help me if you could keep your Bibles open, Amalekite chapter 1, and as always you can find an outline inside the notice sheet if you find that helpful. Let's pray as we turn to God's Word together.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you for your Word as the prophets were carried along by your Spirit, and through them we hear your voice today.

We ask that by your Spirit you would give us ears to hear, heads that can understand, and hearts that are moved to change as we respond rightly to your message.

For Jesus' name's sake, amen. Let's begin with a song clip. I recall the horror and the sadness of thee from the squalor and the filth and the misery, how we laugh up here in heaven, pray as you offer me, that's why I love mankind.

That was Randy Newman singing, That's Why I Love Mankind. I don't know if you know Randy Newman. He did a number of movie soundtracks like Toy Story, but he's more famous probably for his protest songs, lots about racism, amazing songs actually.

[1 : 42] But when it came to his theology, he has a disturbing idea in that song, God's Song it's called, and it's exploring this idea of, well, what if God doesn't really love us?

And even worse than that, what if God does love us, but in a sinister way, because he looks at us and the mess we're making, and sees us as unlovable, but almost kind of in a nasty way, loves the way we still turn to him in trouble.

So it says in the song clip we heard, I recoil in horror from the foulness of thee, from the squalor and the filth and the misery, how we laugh up here in heaven at the prayers you offer me, that's why I love mankind.

And from Randy Newman's perspective, I guess as well, that's partly because he wrote so many songs about how awful mankind is to one another. He's probably thinking, why would God love us?

Now at St. Sardis, we're starting this series in Malachi. It's the last book in the Old Testament. And at that time, God's people, Israel, are living around Jerusalem. They had been given that land as the promised land and led into it.

[3 : 00] But then when they turned their backs on God, they were exiled from it. And now they're back in the land. So it's a great book to look at in the buildup to Christmas because it's the people of God living in hardship, waiting for the Messiah.

And the distinctive thing going on in Malachi is that God's people are questioning God. If you look down at verse 6 of chapter 1, God says, it is you priests who show contempt for my name, but you ask, how have we shown contempt for your name?

In verse 7, by offering defiled food on my altar, but you ask, how have we defiled you? In chapter 2, verse 17, you have wearied the Lord with your words.

How have we wearied him? In chapter 3, verse 8, the Lord says, you rob me, but you ask, how are we robbing you? He says in chapter 3, verse 13, you've spoken against me.

And they say, what have we said against you? Now, most of us struggle from time to time, and it's entirely reasonable to ask questions of God. The Psalms show us that.

[4 : 16] They show us God's faithful people questioning God with real doubts and struggles and uncertainty. But here in Malachi, the people are spiritually sulking.

And we know that they're spiritually sulking because rather than ask God questions and continue to live obediently for God, as you read the book, what you find is they are giving God second best because really, they're not convinced about him at all.

And that makes Malachi a very practical book to read. In chapter 1, we think about sacrifices. They were meant to bring their best animals to the temple, and we find they're bringing defective animals instead.

In chapter 2, we find they're being unfaithful in their marriages, in who they marry and how they treat their spouses because they are being unfaithful to God. In chapter 3, they're not giving financially what they should.

They're holding back their tithe. And if I was God and that was my people, I would probably send a prophet to say, can you sort this out, please, and get on with obeying me properly.

[5 : 18] But that's not where God starts because those behavioral issues are just symptoms of the real underlying problem. And that's where God goes. In chapter 1, verse 2, I have loved you, says the Lord, but you ask, how have you loved us?

So our first point, the questioning of the love of God. And that's the heart of the problem. So what causes God's people to question his love for them? Well, probably similar things to what might cause us to question God's love today.

Firstly, they may be thinking, God's demands on us, they're too restrictive and constraining. They're harsh. Does he really love me?

Because the memory of their ancestors in exile was still with them. They had had to leave homes and jobs behind to come back into the land when they were free to come back to Jerusalem.

And their life is hard for them and they're being asked to bring their best animals to the altar in the temple to give their tithe, to look after the poor. And they might be thinking, does God really love me?

[6 : 28] Just as we might think that today, if we compare what our life is like day by day with how it would be if we weren't a Christian, we might sometimes think, I would be having more fun.

Does God really love me? To ask me to spend my time this way instead of that way? To do those things and not those things? But also, they doubt God's love for them because of their circumstances, their situation.

it's really difficult back in the land. And that is so common for us as Christians today. We wouldn't be so crass as to think, if I obey God, He's going to bless me and He's going to give me good health.

If I obey God, He's going to give me a good job, plenty of money, I'll be married, I'll have kids, they'll be healthy. We wouldn't think like that because that's the prosperity gospel and we kind of know that's a lie.

But deep down in our hearts, we have an expectation of what our lives should look like if God loves us. The bare minimum our lives need to contain if we're going to really believe that God loves us.

[7 : 43] Like a bar God has to get over that we think of as the blessed life. And if we're disappointed, if we're disappointed by loneliness, by bereavement, by ill health, by depression, by unemployment, by where we live, by where we don't live, by how people treat us, by how our church treats us, by failure, by other people's successes, by singleness, by childlessness, by the stuff we don't have, when any of that stuff hits us, we end up thinking, how has God loved me?

Does he really love me? Do you see how that works? So we're all in danger of the same downward spiral of thinking that had gone on in Malachi's time. What makes you doubt God's love for you?

Or perhaps you could think, what is there in my life that if it was taken away from me would really make me think, I'm not sure God does love me. So that's our first point, the questioning of the love of God.

And that's why we need the second point so much, the conditions on the love of God. Let's read again from verse 2. I have loved you, says the Lord, but you ask, how have you loved us?

Was not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord? Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland, and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.

[9 : 29] So God gives them a little history lesson here. Their forefather Abraham was given the promises from God that will put the whole world right. And those promises were to go through Abraham's descendants to form a great nation, and ultimately they get to Jesus.

But when Abraham has a son Isaac, Isaac has two boys, well his wife Rebecca has two boys for them, and even while those boys are still in the womb, twin boys, Jacob and Esau, God says that the promises are going to go in Jacob's line and not Esau's line.

So Jacob's descendants become this nation, Israel, that inherits God's promises. Esau's descendants become a different nation, Edom, and they become an enemy of God's people.

And when we get to the New Testament, to Romans chapter 9, it explains that God's choosing of Christians is exactly the same. People who are Christians today, how we're saved is the same as the way God chose Jacob and not Esau.

Why does God love Jacob? Why does he decide the promises are going to go to him and not to Esau? When you read Genesis 25 and you read that whole story, it's actually very difficult to tell.

[10 : 40] There's no easy answer. If anything, lots of us reading would prefer Esau. He's the rugged, strong man of adventure. He's kind of the Bear Grylls of the family out there doing sort of manly stuff.

And Jacob is this kind of stay-at-home mummy's boy who when it gets to the critical time and his dad can barely see, deceives his dad into thinking he is Esau so that he can get the family blessing even though he's younger.

He doesn't deserve God's love. But the thing is, that's the whole point. It's not that Jacob is any better than Esau. Before he'd done anything, good or bad, before either of them had, both of them are as bad as each other.

Neither of them deserves God's love. And God is free to choose. The language Esau I hated is very strong, isn't it?

But it's not that God hates Esau so much as, I mean, he does because it says it, but it's about the comparison between Jacob and Esau. That is that God chose one line from Isaac to inherit the blessing and not the other.

[11 : 48] That's the context in which that love and hate language is used. So that centuries later, that nation Edom has turned its back on God and in judgment against them and their horrible behavior, God allows a foreign empire to come in and conquer them.

Whereas Israel, even though similar things happened to them in the recent past, its future is going to be completely different because it's waiting for the Messiah, God's promised rescuing king.

was God wrong to judge the Edomites for their sin? No. He's a God of justice and he gave them what their sins deserve.

It wasn't wrong of him to do that. It was just. Was God wrong to have mercy on Jacob and his descendants and make them his people?

Was he wrong to do that? No. He was having mercy and God can have mercy on whomever he wants. So God reassures his people with this history lesson that he's chosen them and he has loved them with a particular love.

[13 : 00] It's the same for us today. In a very real way, God loves everyone he has made. He loves everyone. If you're here and you're not yet a Christian, God loves you.

He loves you with a love that made you. He plans to make you. He is grieved that you're far from him. He hates your sin because it's alienated you from him.

He loves you so that he sent his one and only son to perish so that he could offer you forgiveness and a fresh start with him. And he loves you with a love that longs for you to turn back to him.

But if you're already a Christian, that's because God loves you with a love that chose you before the foundation of the world so that at some point in your past when you heard about Jesus, God sent his spirit into your heart to open your eyes to see who Jesus is and enable you in your heart to receive Jesus as your savior.

And God tells us that to reassure us. What happened to Jacob shows us that when it comes to God's love for us, it starts with God.

[14 : 17] It doesn't start with us. God doesn't love you, Christian, because you responded rightly to Jesus. No, you responded rightly to Jesus because God loves you.

What are the conditions on God's love? It's unconditional love. So in Deuteronomy chapter 7, the Lord says this, the Lord did not set his affection on you and choose you because you were more numerous than other peoples, for you were the fewest of all peoples.

But it was because the Lord loved you and kept the oath he swore to your ancestors that he brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the land of slavery, from the power of Pharaoh, king of Egypt.

He loves them because he loves them. And so it is for us. In Romans chapter 5, we read this about us. It's on the screen.

Romans chapter 5. You see, at just the right time, when we were still powerless, Christ died for the ungodly. Very rarely will anyone die for a righteous person, though for a good person, someone might possibly dare to die.

[15 : 26] But God demonstrates his own love for us in this. While we were still sinners, Christ died for us. The supreme example of God's love for us comes when we were at our worst, raging against God, and we deserved nothing but his wrath for our sin.

And we need to remember that. It means that if you fail God, he still loves you. If you're a Christian and you do wrong, God doesn't fall out of love for you, it's unconditional.

And that is wonderfully reassuring. If your friends knew everything that was going on inside your head, do you think they'd still love you? I don't think my friends would want anything to do with me if they knew what's going on inside my head all the time.

But God's love for me is unconditional. My sin doesn't take me away from his love. And perhaps you could think, if you're a Christian, if you went out tonight or tomorrow and you did something really, really awful, do you think that God would still love you?

He would be grieved in the way that a loving parent is grieved. But the truth is that compared to God's holiness, we're doing really awful things all the time.

[16 : 51] He knows what we're like and he loves us anyway. And he always has, even before he made the universe. So we thought about the questioning of the love of God, secondly about the conditions on the love of God, and finally this evening, the demonstration of the love of God.

In verses 4 and 5, we hear that worse is to come for Edom. Verse 4, Edom may say, though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.

But this is what the Lord Almighty says, they may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the wicked land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord.

You will see it with your own eyes and say, great is the Lord, even beyond the borders of Israel. In other words, what God is saying here is there is a future judgment coming.

And on that day, he says to Israel, you'll see me treat people as their sins deserve, and you might not think I love you now, but when you see people receive what sins deserve, and instead you receive grace and mercy, then it will be very clear to you how much I love you.

[18 : 06] And so it is for us that we won't grasp the love of God if we forget that we're sinners and he has rescued us from that. It's the ultimate expression of his love.

And for us, that doesn't just mean looking forward to Jesus coming again to judge the world. It also means looking back to when God's justice fell in history at the cross and God himself substituted himself for us, dying in our place to bear the weight of our sin that we could go free.

I don't know how many of you are football fans, but last week was a bad week for Arsenal in the English Premiership. They're now trailing well behind Manchester City, and we're just a month away from Christmas.

Now at Christmas, it's a big deal who's top of the league in the Premier League, because they often use Christmas as a marker for how things might finish at the end of the season. And Arsene Wenger, the Arsenal manager, was asked about this one year, and he said this about how the league looked at Christmas.

He said, Christmas is important, but Easter is decisive. Okay? It's true in football, but he was actually speaking far better than he knew, because when it comes to the question, does God love me?

[19 : 25] Christmas is important, but Easter is decisive. So that Paul, in Galatians 2, says, the life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, the one who loved me and gave himself for me.

He loved me when he died for me. As we've sung this evening, here is love vast as the ocean, loving kindness as a flood, when the Prince of life, our ransom, shed for us his precious blood.

For we're no better than the Edomites. I guess that's why we find it hard to read about their judgment and destruction. We're no better, but at the cross we see our Redeemer, the Eternal Son, standing in our place, bearing our guilt that we might go free.

I don't know whether you've ever heard the story *The Curfew Must Not Ring Tonight*. It's set in the 17th century and in an English village and Oliver Cromwell and the Puritans are in charge and there's this young lady, Bessie, and she has a lover who gets thrown into prison and he's sentenced with death and the sentence is that he'll die that night when the curfew bell rings.

The curfew bells used to go off all across the country at 8 o'clock and people had to be indoors. So this bell gets rung at 8 o'clock that evening so Bessie goes to the sexton who's going to ring the bell and begs the sexton not to ring it that night so that her lover doesn't die and he refuses to break the rules.

[21 : 03] So she climbs up to the top of the bell tower and just before the bell is due to ring, she throws herself onto the clapper so that as the bell is rung her body stops the sound from coming out from the bell and after she's been battered and battered by the bell she comes back down the tower and she staggers out her body damaged from having done all she could to prevent her lover's death and Oliver Cromwell sees what she's done and he says because of what this lady has done the bell hasn't rung so the man will go free.

And in just a little way it's a bit like what's happened to us as Christians that we were under the sentence of death for our sin and Jesus put himself in the way of that so that we could go free battered at the cross to take the sentence of death from us.

and when we see that we should have no doubt that God loves us very much. Lots of us today like the idea of a loving God and we find it hard that God would be a God who judges sin but as soon as you start to deny God's justice and that that ultimately leads to judgment and hell when we deny that we actually diminish God's love for us.

We're not going to feel loved by God if we forget what he saved us from. The ultimate expression of God's love for you is that he does not treat you as your sins deserve.

And so if you want to know if God loves you you mustn't go by your experience today in life. You mustn't judge his love for you by your present circumstances. because then when disappointments come when you are overwhelmed by how little you have or what you don't have you're not going to feel loved by God.

[23 : 08] But you judge his love for you by what he has demonstrated in the past at the cross and how that gives you secure promises for the future with him forever. And the more we grasp that the less we'll feel like arguing with God as the people were then.

And when we understand the cross like that it's very inspiring for us. There was a Christian in the 18th century Count von Zinzendorf and he was a courtier in Germany and one day he was with an embassy going to a village and he popped into an art gallery at lunchtime and he never came out.

And it got near the end of the day and they went eventually they went in to find him and they found him sitting in front of a painting transfixed. It was a painting of Jesus with his arms stretched out on the cross and underneath it said all this I have done for you what now will you do for me?

And Count Zinzendorf was a changed man from that day on he founded the Moravian movement of Christians that sent missionaries around the world. It was through them that great Christian leaders in Britain John Wesley and George Whitefield were converted George Whitefield came to Scotland and saw thousands of people come to faith through his ministry in Canbetsland there was a huge revival well these guys in Malachi's time they were giving God second best maybe some of us today are not really feeling up for being wholehearted as a Christian and perhaps for us the solution is the same as it was for them to reflect on God's love for you we've got some questions for reflection in the sheets but let's pray together now Father God whose love for us who fear you is as high as the heavens are above the earth we thank you for loving us unconditionally that we might stand secure in your love by your spirit we ask you to open our eyes more fully to the depths of our sin and the judgment our sins deserve that we might look at the cross and our hearts would be filled to overflowing with a renewed awareness of the depths of your love for us that you would bear the weight of our sin that we could look to the future with glorious hope we ask for a greater appreciation of all you've done for us for your glory and for Jesus name's sake amen and for your lender so the