

## **Give God your best**

### Illustration

When I was young and learning the piano, my parents found it so hard and frustrating to get me to practice the pieces I was learning for my exams. They were constantly encouraging me to practice my pieces. When I was in about 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my teacher decided I could start to learn to play church songs, my very first song I learnt was As the Deer. When playing my exam pieces, I would go through the motions of practice, I would do the absolute minimum practice, looking back, Unless it was a week before the exam, I didn't give it my best practice. On the other hand, I loved playing church songs, I could sit at the piano for hours, playing church music, I started memorising songs, I gave learning church songs my best. It's amazing the difference your attitude and effort is when you passionately love something isn't it? Today we get to delve into the book of Malachi, and the words in this book were written to challenge the attitude and effort the Israelites had towards God. God's words were to penetrate the Israelites hearts and to turn them from their disobedience and draw near to him. Even though this is a book from the Old Testament, it doesn't mean it is not relevant to us. God's word is alive and active, it will judge our thoughts and attitudes of the heart. We will see clearly that our attitude and effort towards God is still important in our worship of God today. It may leave us feeling a bit uncomfortable, but we also will see God's overwhelming love that he has for his people.

As you heard the bible reading today, what did the conversation sound like to you? As I read this passage, I could hear God's voice, being a patient, loving parent, and then on the other side of the conversation is the Israelites who sound like a rebellious teenager. Israel

had a bad attitude of questioning God, How God, How have you loved us! This kind of conversation is throughout the whole of Malachi.

Today in chapter 1 we see two conversations that God has with Israel. Before we delve into the book, it's important for us to see the background of what was happening when it was written. So let's have a quick look at a timeline.

It was the last book written in the Old Testament a bit over 400 years before Christ. In 722 BC, Israel is captured by Babylon and was taken from their land. In 539 Persia conquered the Babylonians and were now in control of Israel. In 538, Cyrus the Persian king allows some Israelites to return to their homeland, and to start to rebuild God's temple. 515BC the second temple is finally built.

Now at some points in the history of Israel after the exile they were excited and joyful about returning home, and eager to rebuild their temple so that they could worship God and make sacrifices to him, they were promised by God that there will be a glorious future for Israel and so they were waiting with eager anticipation.

As I was preparing this talk, I was thinking, what would make Israel challenge God with the question, How have you loved us? What expectation did they have that God was not meeting?

Life for Israel wasn't always joyful and filled with excitement at being back home, life at home was hard, Israel became disappointed, yes they had land and were living in relative peaceful and comfortable lives, but they were still under the rule of Persia, the nations

around them were bullying them. Yes, they had built a temple, but it wasn't as good as the one Solomon built. What happened to the promise that Zechariah and Haggai prophesied to them about this glorious future that they were to have? Where was God? The Israelites seemed to feel like God was distant, unreliable and unloving.

Well in the verses 3-5 God answers their question, and at first glance it's really strange isn't it.

God's answer takes us back to an ancient uncomfortable family history and loving one brother and hating the other. Do you remember the history of Jacob and Esau. Their parents were Isaac and Rebekah, They were twin brothers. Through Jacob came the nation Israel, and through Esau came the nation Edom. Even before they were born, God promised that the older will serve the younger. From the beginning God chose to love Jacob, and God chose to hate Esau.

We now we have to be careful not to misunderstand what is being said. When we read this part of God's word and we tend to recoil a bit don't we. We don't like hearing that God hates. So what does this actually mean, is it really saying that God hates Esau? Well the word hate concerns God choosing as part of his Covenant rather than his emotions. God hates Esau because there was no covenant made with him. He is outside of the covenant, and this is one way of expressing the relationship that God has with them.

Another thing that we need to be aware of is the type of language being used. An extreme statement is used here to make a point. I loved Jacob, but Hated Esau. Do you remember

Jesus saying in Luke If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters—yes, even their own life—such a person cannot be my disciple..<sup>1</sup> When I was in high school I used to enjoy frustrating my bible study leaders with this verse by telling them that they'd taught me that I was to hate my parents. It's an extreme statement and it makes us pay attention, doesn't it? If you remember in Matthew 10, the language has been changed to Jesus saying, you must love me more than family.

Well, let gets back to the answer that God was giving to the Israelites How has God loved you? You see the love of God in the destruction of Edom and the restoration of Israel.

Both nations had rebelled against God in so many terrible ways, both nations had received their deserved judgement through war and famine. They were the same in every way. What was the difference? God chose to love Israel and rebuild their nation. Israel was back in their homeland, they were able to rebuild their temple. It may not have been as wonderful as they have expected, but God had restored his chosen one. God is saying to Israel, You don't think I love you? well look at Esau and his nation. The nation of Edom is destroyed, and it will always be destroyed. It will never be restored like Israel was restored. Even though Edom wants to rebuild, they'll never be able to, because God was against them. God wants Israel to realise that they could have been destroyed just like Edom, but they weren't because of God's love for them.

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<sup>1</sup> *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Lk 14:26–27.

Despite everything Israel had gone through, God has not abandoned his people, he has kept his promises, yes, they were still waiting for God's promise of a glorious future, but they can rely on God being faithful to his promises.

Now friends, this is still the case for us. We can see that what God has promised in the past, is still true today.

God has promised us that we can have a relationship with him and have eternal life. Do you have moments in your life when you ask the same question How has God loved you? how can I be in a covenant relationship with God?

God's answer for us is found in Romans chapter 5:8, But God demonstrates his own love for us in this: While we were still his enemies, Christ died for us<sup>2</sup> It is through Christ that we are included into God's family, and he hasn't loved us because of who we are, or where we have come from, he just loves us, while we were still his enemies. Jesus life, death and resurrection says to us, I have loved you in the past, and I'm still loving you now in the present, and there's no reason why I should stop loving in the future!

Having reminded Israel of Gods' love for them, Malachi turns to Israels interaction with God. In verse 6, God continues on his conversation with Israel and it addresses the issue of sacrifice which should be a loving response to the love they have received, but we see that the Israelites have a second best attitude of sacrifice. God is their Father and Master, and they're not treating him with the respect and honour that a Great King like God deserves.

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<sup>2</sup> *The New International Version* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2011), Ro 5:8.

It reminded me a little bit of my time in high school when I was a prefect. We had school rules that were to be followed at all times, and as prefects we were to make sure that happened. At home time, every day, we always had a prefect at the front gate to make sure that every girl was presentable (according to our rules) as they went out into public. One of our rules was that if you had your hair up, you had to have a green ribbon. And you'd get in trouble for not having one. Well, I cannot count the number of times that some of the girls walked past me with a piece of grass tied around their hair like a ribbon. Who did they think I was? I wasn't smart enough to know that a piece of grass wasn't the school issued green ribbon? I was a prefect, They showed a disrespect to me by thinking that following the rules in a second rate way they could get away with it.

This is what the Israelites were doing, they were worshipping God in a second rate way, and they didn't even care whether or not they were obeying God or not! Even the priests didn't care, they were the ones who should have known the laws of God, and stopped the Israelites from sacrificing sick and lame animals. They thought that God wouldn't care, but he does care.

It's not very difficult to see how this is relevant to us today is it? We don't have the altar of the sacrificial system of Israel, but we have the Lord Jesus Christ and his sacrifice wasn't a broken down second hand one, his sacrifice was of himself, the perfect Son of God, and in response to God's mercy that we receive through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ we are to offer ourselves as living sacrifices, holy and acceptable to our heavenly Father. Well just like the Israelites who went through the ritual of sacrifices but in reality only offer up to God their

rubbish, so we also can go through the routine of worshipping God, and only offer God our left over bits of our life.

Have you ever thought about how you can give God your best in your worship of him?

Let me suggest some things to think about in how we can worship God and give him our best.

We should give God our best in terms of priorities

Going to church can become for many followers of Jesus, a kind of default option to do, when you've got nothing else better to do, when there's a family BBQ, when there's a football match or when there's an outing or party, whenever anything else is around, I will do it, but if there's nothing else to do, well then I may as well go to church today. That's giving God our second best isn't it?

Do our priorities - the way we spend time, money, and efforts - reflect the things that matter most to God? Am I seeking *first* God's kingdom and righteousness in my personal life, my business, my family, and my spare time activities? From personal experience, reading God's word helps me to stay on track, I know that when I stop reading God's word, my priority changes. God's word is living and active, allow it to change you so that you can give God your best.

When we do come to church on Sunday how prepared are we to worship God. Every week in our newsletter is the following weeks details of what's happening in our service, it tells us

which passage we're reading, could you perhaps use some of your time to prepare in your heart and mind and be ready to listen to God?

While we are here in the service, do we put effort and concentration into our worship. Do we concentrate during the bible readings and the sermon, or are our thoughts easily distracted about what should we have for lunch, or did I leave the backdoor unlocked?

Well it's not just about giving second best at church, it's easy to read the bible without ever thinking about what it means, let alone thinking about how it should change our lives.

It's so easy to give the left overs of our money to Christian causes, rather than planning how best you can use your money for God's kingdom.

We have the opportunity to give God our best, are we doing that? I don't know what situation in life you may be going through at the moment, and I don't really know what's going on in your heart. only you do. So, Let's be honest with ourselves this morning. Let the Holy Spirit, through God's living and active word, change us, so that we may be obedient followers of Jesus.

As we move into our new building, are we being like the Israelites in Malachis time. Are we tired of waiting for Gods promises to come true? Are we forgetting the amazing things that God has done for us. Are we going through the motions of Worship and praising God? Or are we giving God our best? Is God the center of our lives because we know he loves us and has promised us an amazing future.



Heavenly Father, we sit here today surrounded by your love and for that we're thankful, we have your living and active word and we thank you for that. Please Lord bring it to life today, and through your word give us power to grasp how wide and long and how high and deep is the love of Christ, so that our love can grow wider, longer, higher and deeper too. Help us to be obedient followers of you, may we always give you our best.