

Covenant faithful God - Malachi 2:10-16

How are you going with your thinking about Malachi? It's a bit different to reading Acts isn't it. One of the things we need to keep in mind is that God is calling his people back to himself to truly BE his people. He has made a covenant with him; a solemn pledge or promise. It's much much more than a contract. A **contract** is an agreement **between** parties while a **covenant** is a pledge. A **contract** is an agreement you can break while a **covenant** is a perpetual promise. You seal a **covenant** while you sign a **contract**. A **contract** is a mutually beneficial relationship while a **covenant** is something you fulfill, you actually carry out your part whatever the cost because you promised it.

Malachi is about God's people who have been unfaithful and what's God going to do to a people that have been unfaithful. In our first 2 talks we've seen that God reminds the people how much he loves them. He chose them and had mercy on them. And then last week God is reminding the people that he has all authority but they are not acknowledging that. They still don't understand how great and extraordinary God is. God is basically saying in this book of Malachi. I've kept the covenant but you haven't. Here's how I've kept it and here's how you haven't. Which is what leads us into today's passage where there is a lot of very strong language. God is telling the people that he has been faithful to their covenant and they haven't been faithful to the covenant. God's going to stay faithful to this marriage that he's made, to this covenant that he's made.

So this passage in this book is not primarily about human relationships per se, but about covenant.

1.0 A covenant keeping God (v10)

The passage is all about breaking faith, breaking your promises, just not doing what you said you would do. People had failed to see the greatness of God's faithfulness towards them. And it shows in that they are breaking faith with each other. So this shows that they don't really know the God they are serving. v.10 sets up the key idea. READ

“father” in fact refers to Abraham, not God our Father. Some would say it refers to Moses. Either way it’s about covenant. The covenant with Abraham is a reflection on God’s faithfulness – aren’t we all descendants from Abraham so we have God’s covenant promises to us. Aren’t we the result of God keeping his covenant? Well then why aren’t we covenant keeping people? Why do we profane the covenant?

We’re at the end of the OT – the Israelites could look back and see that God has been incredibly faithful through good times, bad times – God has always been there keeping up his end of the covenant. Faithfulness matters to God; honouring commitments is a big thing for him.

This is far more than a moralistic passage of you shouldn’t break your word – it’s far more relational. Their actions show that they don’t really know God.

If Israel is unfaithful with each other then this reflects that they don’t get God at all. And this is what makes it so serious. And explains why God is so forceful in what he goes on to say.

There’s a little word, *bagad*, which mean faithless – it occurs 5 times in this passage. By tracing faithlessness through in all the relationships of the text, Malachi makes clear for us two alternative ways for people to try to live in a community.

One way is what you might call **covenantal order**—it’s what the OT means by *shalom*. All relationships are made peaceful and pure by the fulfillment of covenants and promises and oaths and contracts and commitments. Children to parents, and parents to children. Husbands to wives and wives to husbands. Employer to employee and employee to employer. Citizen to state and state to citizen. The peace and prosperity and joy—the *shalom*—of the community is held together by the deep strong spirit of covenant-keeping that pervades the community. The very fabric of the community is the trustworthiness of its people. And the fact that they keep their commitments.

The other way for people to try to live together in community is the opposite of covenantal order; it’s what you might call the disorder of self-indulgence. In this community the spirit of

commitment-making and commitment-keeping has been replaced by a spirit of emotional and physical impulse. The moral fabric of faithfulness to covenants and promises and contracts is unravelled and what's left are the individual strands of private gratification.

The phrase in v.10 is that it **profanes the covenant of our ancestors (or fathers)**. "Why do we profane or violate the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?"

What was this covenant? It was God's commitment to be Abraham's God, to work for him and bless him and give him life and hope—and not only him but all his true offspring, including you and me in Jesus Christ the seed of Abraham. In other words, whenever you or I lie or fudge on our duties, or betray a trust, we act as though God is not able to take care of us and protect us and give us a fulfilling life if we keep our commitments. (It takes us back to the garden of Eden – as Adam & Eve stood in front of the tree of good and evil – Did God really say you can't eat this? Can you really trust God to be doing what is best for you?). **And when we act as though God cannot or will not give us what is best for us on the path of faithfulness, we profane his covenant. We act as though his covenant, in fact God himself, is untrustworthy and worthless.**

So against this general backdrop of unfaithfulness, people going back on their promises, God points out two critical areas in which their unfaithfulness is seen:

2.0 A covenant breaking people Look at v.11-12- READ - marrying the daughter of a foreign god

Here God is describing the marriage of an Israelite to a non-Israelite as a breaking of faith. Curious things because marriage is where you promise faithfulness but in this case what was happening was a breach of their covenant with God.

Back in Leviticus & Deuteronomy God made it very clear that the Israelite people were not to marry women who followed other gods. It would have the effect of turning their hearts away from him. It would weaken and loosen and compromise their commitment to him. And it certainly did in the OT. There were numerous examples of this all through Israelite history.

Now in Malachi's day possibly they were just marrying these women so that they could get land, land which had been lost when they were in exile. Their desire to make their lives on earth more secure was more important than their commitment to stay loyal to Yahweh & on top of that it was just an act of outright disobedience because God had said not to do it.

The world says do what you want to do. What do you feel would bring you pleasure? There is a strong call from the world to self-indulgence. God's call is to covenant-keeping commitment. Will you trust the covenant-keeping God?

The second critical area is here in v.13-16 - divorcing "the wife of your youth"

Notice the covenant word again – it's a solemn formal pledge – so to divorce our marriage partner is to unambiguously go back on our word; in fact it's made all the worse because God is acting as the witness to this. Again, the Israelite men were divorcing their wives in order to marry the foreign women.

God is not a passive bystander in a marriage – particularly in a marriage where both are followers of God, God is there confirming it, he is there joining them together. In fact in the NT this is ramped up as God describes marriage. In Ephesians he says marriage is granted a great dignity of being a model of God's own covenant with his church. God reckons marriage matters big time, because when we renege on it, it not only shows that we don't keep our word, it is dishonouring to God himself as if promising something formerly before him is something you can go back on? God feels strongly about this.

v.16 is a verse which is translated in two main ways. In many versions it says, "For I hate divorce, says the Lord God of Israel," and covering one's garment with violence". covering oneself with violence" – I think this is the better way to translate this verse because it graphically shows how God views the covenant relationship with Israel. Divorce is an act that tears at the relationship between 2 people who have made a covenant before God. In that second image, covering one's garment with violence I suspect that God is using a very common image of the day to explain why he feels so strongly about divorce. To cover your garment over someone was a common picture or image of a family which was covered by the

Father. (compare the story of Ruth, who covered herself with Boaz' blanket as she slept at his feet – it was an audacious call to him to cover her, and so to protect her) And so I cover Georgina and Emma, Sam, Rebekah and Sophie with my garment, is how it might be said. So God is saying here that when you divorce it is like covering the relationship with violence, not the protection and safety that it is meant to represent. Divorce brings violence against those who you are meant to protect. Divorce wreaks havoc, divorce brings destruction to a family.

So the NIV version has a slightly different slant where the hate is attributed to the man who acts in divorce and not so much towards God but the point is still the same . God is depicting divorce as a terrible, divisive violent thing that brings a lot of collateral damage. God views divorce within the same category as physical abuse within the marriage. That's hard. And I think almost anyone I know who's had anything to do with a divorce and who has been through it themselves they pretty much say the same thing, it has been one of the worst times of their life for no one comes out of it unscathed. It is incredibly painful. And here in our church there are a number of precious people who carry the beatings and bruises of divorce.

We need to aim for radical, out of the ordinary faithfulness, we need to be going to extraordinary measures to protect our marriages; in fact, we need to be going to extraordinary measure with all our dealings with all people. We need to be aiming for a faithfulness that will honour God and will cause people to sit up and take notice. Our God is a relationship keeping God. Our relationships with each other are precious, at the core of why we were created. God made us for relationship with him

Let's keep faith, because that's what our God does, to extraordinary levels. Faith in all the things we do; when we say we'll do something let's make sure that we've weighed up all the implications, so that we can honour our yes to something.

I don't think that it's inappropriate to raise in the context of faithfulness to God and to marriage partners to raise the issue of pornography. This is a huge issue in our society, and I think even more so during this time of Covid isolation and more time at home and on a screen.

When Georgina discovered that I was looking at inappropriate pictures of women a few years ago it tore at the fabric of our relationship. It violated the pledge that I had made to her. Pornography and the sexualizing of so many aspects of life in our society is a huge issue for us today. The statistics show that 56% of divorce cases involved one party having an “obsessive interest in pornographic websites. But listen to this - **43% of senior pastors and youth pastors**, this is in America but it’s probably similar here, say they have struggled with pornography in the past. **64% of Christian men** and **15% of Christian women** say they watch porn at least once a month. This is tearing at the fabric of our relationships and our society.

So how can we get out of this addictive violence? The thing that helped me was to replace the porn with something better. It wasn’t enough to say, “I mustn’t look at this. I mustn’t. It was appealing. It was attractive. But the thing that helped me was the reminder that I wanted to love my wife and my God more than the fantasy pictures of half-dressed women. If you are struggling with this, and I’ll admit it is still an area that I struggle with, it’s a bit like my thorn in the flesh, I said to God, I want to be a faithful father, husband, child of God. Give me a love for George, a love for you, so that the pictures of women, become unimportant. So I regularly pray, “Lord help me today to remain faithful to you and George. Help me to love George and you more than these pictures.”

It’s a battle. But this is not the only way we might express our unfaithfulness. There can be unfaithfulness in our use of time and money, in our words, in our priorities – anything that might break the fabric of our relationships; that might tear or cause violence to relationships.

I’m conscious that reading these verses raises many painful issues, because marriage, divorce and the raising of children are tender issues for many of us sitting here this morning. Some want to get married, and cannot find someone to marry. Some want to have children, and are not able to do so. Some feel trapped in difficult marriages. Some are married to unbelievers, or to a husband or wife who was formerly a believer, but is no longer a practising Christian. Some have raised their children in the faith of Christ, and now find that their children have turned away from Jesus. Some have ended their marriages, and now realise that this was a mistake. Some have had children who have died. Some have had children who have serious health problems. Some have experienced painful divorce, especially if they have been

discarded by their husband or wife. Some of you have come from very dysfunctional families or marriages, and feel that biblical standards are impossible to achieve. Some may feel that their marriage is in a mess.

As a church we are called to be faithful to each other, to stand with each other, to support each other. We can listen to each other, and seek to understand. Whatever else we do we need to say to ourselves and encourage each other that whatever we do we need to trust God, and trust his love, compassion, power and goodness. We need to find a few good and trustworthy and discreet friends and promise to pray for each constantly. (I am encouraged by the ones in the church who are doing that.) We need to remember that we are free to tell God all our anger, all our frustration and all our pain. David did that in the Psalms; Job did that as he cried out in his suffering. Keep praying and crying out to God.

Remember that verse we had from Galatians 6:2 earlier this year – “bear one another’s burdens, and in this way you will fulfil the law of Christ.” We should do this humbly, with no judgement, with compassion and faithfulness.

These verses from Malachi are a call to faithfulness: a call to be faithful in marriage, a call to be faithful to our fellow-believers, and a call to be faithful to our faithful God. It’s a call to be counter-cultural, to go against all that our world would say will make you happy. To be faithless to our fellow-believers is to be faithless to God. To be faithless to the church of Jesus Christ is to be faithless to God.

But in this I want to remind us of the picture of the Father and the Son. You remember, the young son who took his inheritance before his father had died and left him. When he returned he threw himself, with a repentant heart, at the feet of his father – Father I am no longer worthy to be called your son; forgive me and just let me be like a servant in your house. But the Father lifts him up and embraces him and receives him back as his son.

There is forgiveness in our amazing God who forgives and restores. But we must come with a repenting heart. I want to remain faithful to God, to Georgina, to my children and grandchildren, to my friends, to you my brothers and sisters. We will let each other down but there is one who will never abandon us, never let us down- our faithful God. He went to the

cross that we might have restored relationship with him. What a faithful covenant-keeping God!! We need to sing here.

Great is Thy Faithfulness

ESV

¹⁰Have 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? ¹¹Judah 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. ¹²May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant^a of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!

¹³And 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. ¹⁴But 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. ¹⁵Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union?^b And what was the one God^a seeking?^b Godly offspring. So guard yourselves^b 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,^b says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers^b his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless."**

These are strong words. Raises issues for us. We are not Israelites, a big question for us in the NT as NT Christians we have been born into great freedom as God's people. Light of living in the freedom of Jesus and we're not Israelites – but does God still feel strongly about his people marrying his people? For a Christian to marry a non-Christian? Does God still see that as a detestable thing because it weakens the bonds in the church family. The idea of a Christian marrying a non-christian doesn't come up very much in the NT at all and the language is not as strong as that here in Malachi. However, the NT does reinforce the same basic thrust that God's people are to marry God's people. In 1 Cor.7 referring to widowers who are free to marry again says they can marry whoever they wish but only in the Lord. So in other words if the choice of a marriage partner is still before us, do not marry a person who does not love Jesus with all their heart. So the same basic direction of the message in Malachi

We are not to treasure romance more than our obedience to God. We are not to value intimacy more than obeying our heavenly father

And it's for that reason that as I've prepared the talk a big part of me wants to add qualifications at almost every step of the way. A very big part of me wants to point out that getting a divorce is not an unforgiveable sin, to say that this passage is not everything that the Bible says about divorce, that I think the Bible does permit it in certain specific situations; to add in that marrying a non-Christian is not an unforgiveable sin; God can convert non-Christian partners; and if you have a non-Christian partner God certainly doesn't want you to separate from them. The trouble with all those sorts of truths, we must not use them to crawl out from under the authority of what God is saying to us this morning. He feels really strongly about marriage.