

TRUE HOPE Malachi 1:1-11

There was a video making the rounds on one of the internet social networking sites that showed a three-year-old boy talking to his mom. Apparently, she had just told him that she loved him. His response was “I love you when you give me cookies.” He was probably thinking that he knew his mom loved him when she gave him cookies. Like this little boy, most of us are very short-sighted. Besides that, we have selective memories. Add to that, we are typically totally selfish and constantly thinking “What’s in it for me?” This kind of thinking is expected of little children, but we are expected to grow out of such immature attitudes.

The Jews in Old Testament times showed a lot of the above characteristics that are common to all people. Every now and then, God would send a message to them to adjust their attitude or to think rationally or just grow up.

The last book in the Old Testament is the prophecy of Malachi. The best-known passage in this book is the comments on tithing. Closer study also shows an emphasis on the impact of being genuine and faithful and how these virtues affect all of life. The style of Malachi’s writing is conversational and it appears that he was recording a dialogue between the nation of Judah and God.

The Hebrew word for Malachi is “Malak” and is usually translated “messenger” or “angel.” Some scholars argue that the name as applied to the author of this book is generic and others say it is the name of a person. Regardless of this debate, the message is the same.

This prophecy was given to the Jews during the period of despair following the return of the exiles from Babylon. Various sources show two possible times. The earlier time (460 BC) preceded Ezra and Nehemiah; the later time (440 BC) followed Ezra and Nehemiah. The earlier time is favored by some because Nehemiah instituted several reforms to correct the problems addressed by Malachi. Many of the same themes and problems show up in the writings of Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi: mixed marriages, famine, debt.

The general attitude of the time was one of despair and unbelief. Their despair was related to the fact that they were still plagued by outside influences from the neighboring countries and the anticipated promised glory had not happened. This led to doubt and a loss of hope which resulted in a casual attitude about the things of God. It would seem that history repeats itself – just look around and observe what is happening in our culture. We see decreases in church attendance, neglect of the tithe and a casual attitude toward all of life.

It is not difficult to see the parallels of what Malachi wrote about and what we are seeing today in our nation. Both the people and the priest neglected the temple service by offering diseased and blemished sacrifices and the tithes were kept for personal use. There was no concern about maintaining their distinctiveness of being God’s chosen people. They intermarried with heathen people and they disregarded the Sabbath. They abandoned moral and ethical standards and openly participated in sorcery, adultery, perjury and oppression.

True Love – 1:1-5

¹ The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi. ² “I have loved you,” says the LORD. But you say, “How have You loved us?” “Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob; ³ but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and *appointed* his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness.” ⁴ Though Edom says, “We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins”; thus says the LORD of hosts, “They may build, but I will tear down; and *men* will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the LORD is indignant forever.” ⁵ Your eyes will see this and you will say, “The LORD be magnified beyond the border of Israel!” Malachi 1:1-5 (NASB95)

The term “oracle” is meant to imply a heavy burden that was to be lifted up. This prophecy was a serious condemnation against Judah. What was at stake was the revival of the people of God. The Jews had a “balance sheet” religion mentality which involved trading or bargaining with God. Such an approach is still in operation today. Many still attempt to bargain with God. We don’t literally say to God, “Let’s make a deal” but many people who find themselves in bad situations will make conditional promises to God. This has been called “foxhole religion.” We also see evidence of it when people will make a statement such as “I just can’t understand it. I have attended church all my life and been a good person and now something like this happens to me. Why me, Lord?” Now that is balance-sheet religion!

Malachi’s opening statement challenged such thinking. The Lord declared that He loves us. The people wanted to challenge that since they did not have immediate gratification of all their wants and needs. They had a gross lack of appreciation for God’s historical relationship to Israel. They were challenged to think back to Jacob and Esau. God chose Jacob even though he was a schemer and very devious and greedy. This should remind us of the words of Paul who wrote in Romans 5:8 “But God commended His love toward us, in that, while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”

The evidence of God’s love for these people was something that happened 2000 years before the birth of Christ. It is somewhat difficult to relate to actions taken in the past that predetermined where we are today because we are short-sighted. We also tend to think of “love” and “hate” in emotional terms. God loved us in that He chose us.

What are the consequences of being “chosen?” Things left to themselves tend toward disorder. Randomness, disorder, and chaos are the natural state of things. The special status of the descendants of Jacob kept them from going the way of the descendants of Esau. God had kept them and watched over them and disciplined them for 1500 years and all they could think was “If God really loved us, then He would give us what we want.”

It was likely difficult for the Jews of Malachi’s time to endorse or even accept that God cared for them in a better way than He did for the descendant of Esau. Just think about what had happened at the time of the Babylonian invasion. The Edomites were not any better or more righteous than the people of Judah and yet their nation and major cities were not destroyed by the Babylonians and they were not exiled to Babylon for seventy years. The major thing they had not taken into account was that correction and chastisement that God brought upon Israel was proof of his love for them. God speaks through chastisement. One of the greatest means of showing His love for us is that He takes time to chastise us when we have done wrong. His chastisement says to us that He loves us. His chastisement says, “I care!” His chastisement says to us, “You are important to me, I have a special plan and purpose for you.”

A good summary of the evidence of God’s love or choice of His people is that in spite of all their terrible behavior that they had been preserved and not obliterated as a people group. Others, such as the descendant of Esau, would not survive in the long run even though they would rebuild following a disaster, God promised that He would tear it down again.

A good exercise for us today would be to make a list of the evidences that God loves us. Do you think our list would agree with the list God would make?

When you think about it, we have no legitimate claims on God’s love. We do have a desperate need to be loved. God loves because of Who He Is. This is grace and our realization of this saves us from the despair that grows out of doubt and presumption.

True Worship – 1:6-10

⁶ “ ‘A son honors *his* father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a

master, where is My respect?' says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, 'How have we despised Your name?' ⁷ "You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, 'How have we defiled You?' In that you say, 'The table of the LORD is to be despised.' ⁸ "But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ "But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰ "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle *fire on My altar!* I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you. Malachi 1:6-10 (NASB95)

Throughout the history of humanity, the idea of honor and respect for parents, for employers, and for those in positions of spiritual and civic leadership was an expectation that most people endorsed and observed. When this attitude is missing, then all we have left is anarchy. I think all of us have observed a growing number of situations of anarchy in our nation and worldwide. It is not total chaos, but we do see pockets or outbreaks every now and then. What is more evident is an ongoing and subtle growing of a more universal trend of disrespect of parental authority, teachers in our schools, church leaders, civic leaders, employers, politicians, and anyone else we might name.

In the days of Malachi, disrespect of parents or slave owners (employers) and of governing officials was dealt with severe accountability. This expected show of respect and honor was the basis of the comparison God used to challenge the people and the leaders of Judah regarding the root of the problems they were experiencing. Their claim against God was that He did not love them. God's response was that real problem was that they did not love Him. The evidence that they didn't love God was that they did not honor or respect Him.

People may find themselves in awkward situations of showing lack of respect either deliberately, out of ignorance, or simply because it is not important to them. If it is out of ignorance of what is expected, then one can learn and the damage can be corrected. If misplaced priorities are the cause then the situation, then it is much more of a problem. This is where the Jews found themselves during the time of Malachi. They were despising God's name by their actions and attitudes.

The response of the Jews to the charge God made through Malachi was to pretend to be unaware of **how** they had dishonored or disrespected God. People still use this tactic today. How many times have we heard leaders publicly state that they did not know that some illegal activity or something improper was happening in their administration until they read it in the newspaper? This was the reaction of the priests to Malachi's question of where was the expected honor and respect for God. They asked "How have we despised God's name?"

The answer given to them could be summarized simply as "improperly worshiping God." As we know, worship was expressed in the presentation of sacrifices of animals that the people brought to the temple. Were people participating in this activity? Yes! They were bringing animals. So, why was God not pleased with that? Would we not make the argument that "doing something is better than doing nothing?" We make that argument all the time.

What was wrong with "just doing something?" As we see in the message from God that the "something" they were doing was presenting sick and lame animals instead of giving their best to God. Since we don't bring animals to be sacrificed on an altar, then how would such a charge be applied to the way we worship God today?

What is involved in the way we express our worship of God in the church? What do we "bring to the altar" as expressions of worship? We can make a list of various things and then ask the question of ourselves whether what we are doing is the best or something that is less than the best we have. What would be on that list?

We could start with our time and how we prioritize the available time, talent and other resources we have. What could we do with our time that might qualify as acts of worship? We might think of attending a corporate worship service, getting involved in a church ministry, time spent in prayer, studying the Word of God, learning a skill that could be used to help the work of the church, telling others about Jesus, etc.

We can do all these things and find ourselves in the same situation as the Jews and the priest were in Malachi's day. The fault was not that they weren't doing anything, the fault was in the quality of what they were doing. What was the standard of comparison for the quality of what the Jews were doing in Malachi's day? The basis that God used was to compare what they were doing in their worship to what they would do in interacting with someone in the position of governor. He could have also chosen a comparison with how we might interact with parents or employers.

If we were to get a chance to visit the governor of our state, what might we do in preparation for such a meeting? We might learn something about the governor, about his family, what's important to him. We would make sure we were properly dressed for the occasion and would be on our best or most appropriate behavior. We would arrive on time, speak respectfully and observe any other protocols that would be appropriate.

How would such "quality considerations" impact what we do in our worship expressions? If we were to be given an assignment in our work situation, then those who really care would put forth the effort to "do it right" since there would be consequences coming from what was submitted to complete that assignment. We certainly would not simply ignore what we were asked to do or do a shoddy job and turn that in.

How does all this impact what is going on in the church today? Many simply do nothing. They don't even attend. Some who get involved, make what they do a top priority and others take on responsibility but do nothing or expend very little time and effort to do a quality job. It would seem that nothing ever really changes when it comes to how people approach life. What's the difference in offering a lame or crippled animal for sacrifice versus doing "less than our best" in our expression of worship?

It is interesting that God held the priests responsible for not requiring some accountability for what the people did. Could we say that elders and deacons and pastors have some responsibility to set high expectations for church members? We can make that argument and can even expand it to include the need for all of us to have high quality expectations for ourselves as well as our fellow members and leaders. If that argument is valid, then why do we not see accountability in the church?

The lack of accountability can be traced to several possibilities. The first and maybe the most likely is ignorance of what is happening. The second could simply be apathy which says that he may know about it but we really don't care or don't think it is important. It is the kind of attitude that asks the question, "What difference does it make?"

Some of us realize that by challenging questionable behavior in others that we may be opening up ourselves to being challenged for our own questionable behavior and that would inhibit us from doing or saying anything that might be related to accountability. Finally, we perhaps realize that any efforts at restoration would not be graciously received but would be soundly rejected by the person that was committing the questionable behavior. I've heard people in leadership make statements such as "If you don't like what I am doing, then go tell it a tree," or they would say "I know I have faults but I certainly don't need you to tell me about them, the Holy Spirit is perfectly adequate to do that."

God's appeal to them through Malachi was to do the right thing and turn back to him in repentance so that He could bless them and they could avoid the problems of famine, natural disasters, poor economy, and oppression by their enemies. If they were not willing to change and do it right but to go on with their half-hearted, apathetic, and shoddy ways, then God appealed to them to find someone who would be bold enough to just "shut the doors and quit going through the useless motions" because He was not going to accept such worship.

True Greatness – 1:11

¹¹ "For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name *will be* great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering *that is* pure; for My name *will be* great among the nations," says the LORD of hosts. Malachi 1:11 (NASB95)

This statement is probably the reason why God expected to be respected and honored by His people and all people everywhere – from the east to west. From God's perspective (and that's the only one that really matters), everyone – everywhere – could see the greatness of God and His character as expressed in the creation. The acknowledgment of creation itself being the evidence of a Creator should cause every human to praise Him (pictured in the offering of incense) and to worship Him (pictured in offering of grain) simply because of the evident greatness of His nature.

Many commentators (and translators) see this as something that will happen in the future in the time when God's kingdom is established on earth. We don't have to wait until that time to offer such praise and worship unto God in an acceptable way.