

Explore: Faithful

May 11, 2015

- *The Explore the Bible lesson for May 24 focuses on Malachi 2:10-17.*

God's people are to remain faithful to him. Let's again consider our faithfulness and obedience to the Lord through the prophecy of God's messenger, Malachi. Malachi composed his book the late fifth century B.C., a time when the people of Judah once again had grown rather complacent and apathetic toward God. Specifically, the priesthood had corrupted the worship and sacrificial system, while worshippers failed to respect God's authority and word. Malachi boldly called for repentance and for the people to return to their first love—Yahweh.

In this lesson, we will explore Malachi's prophetic wisdom to God's people regarding ways they ought to offer their best to the Lord. Often, worshippers are guilty of placing the things of God on the low side of their priority list. God however requires us to seek first his kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33). Interestingly, Malachi used the marriage covenant as a hard-hitting illustration concerning the relationship between the people and God. That is, we seek first the kingdom as we follow the Lord closely in covenant relationship. This lesson will offer three observations about Malachi's prophecy and instructions.

Malachi spoke to the heart of the matter: Irresponsible behavior (2:10-12)

As a result of poor worship, the daily lives of the people in Malachi's context began to slip into disarray. Bad theology always connects to bad ethics. Specifically, Malachi called out the people of Judah for condoning mixed marriages. Malachi's scolding teaching seems to be as controversial today as it was nearly 2,500 years ago. Many scholars have weighed in on

this passage with varying interpretations. We would be on safe ground to say Malachi took issue with the ways in which the people disobeyed God's directives that dated back to the time when God's people entered the Promised Land.

In other words, Malachi noticed the people took their marriages with little seriousness and thus reflected the larger issue of faithfulness to the Lord. To put it bluntly, the people lived as adulterers toward God in worship, and their adultery extended to their daily social behavior and relationships.

Malachi offered such a direct protest because he believed the people had "profaned the covenant." The word "profane" has to do with contamination or impurity. Consequently, Malachi brought the issue of intermarriage to the fore. Intermarriage, in Malachi's day, not only symbolized a disregard for the Jewish faith in Yahweh, but also brought about a constant temptation towards idolatry. Malachi even charged people in such marriages would be removed from the "tents of Jacob," a decisive and powerful blow.

Malachi reaffirmed the marriage covenant (2:13-15)

Malachi developed his argument in these verses by speaking directly to men who treated their wives and marriages in a flippant way. He illustrated, "You flood the Lord's altar with tears," meaning the adulterous men grieved because the Lord did not accept their offerings. Isn't it interesting the men did not even grasp why the Lord's anger burned against them? Malachi consequently enlightened the men again to the truth about God's view of marriage.

Specifically, the men had abandoned the "wife of your youth," indicating older Jewish men had either divorced or put aside their first wives in favor of younger, perhaps more attractive women from idolatrous nations. Consequently, the men had both literally and figuratively broken their

promises to both their wives and to the Lord. Their attitude toward divorce and remarriage was a sign of spiritual unfaithfulness to God.

Consider Jesus' attitude and theology of marriage, which confirms and fulfills Malachi's prophecy. Jesus both affirmed God's ideal for marriage in Genesis 2:24-25 and dismantled the misogynistic arguments of the religious leaders of his day (Matthew 19:1-13; Mark 10:2-9). Jesus gracefully but boldly showed us the wider context of the marriage relationship in view of our faithfulness to the Lord. Certainly marriage is a covenant and not a contract.

Parenthetically, we note verse 15 comes with a variety of interpretations, some too detailed for our discussion here. Clear and concise biblical commentaries will provide much guidance. Suffice it to say, a popular interpretation suggests Malachi was referencing the disobedience of Abraham in his relationship with Hagar for the benefit of having a child. Another interpretation asserts Malachi infers the monogamous relationship between Adam and Eve for procreation.

Malachi stood for God's justice (2:16-17)

Malachi summed up his thesis and discussion with a simple but powerful statement: "So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful." Malachi apparently viewed the culture of easy divorce and adultery in his day with great contempt. He also viewed the actions of his compatriots through a clear theological lens. The rampant adultery among his people served as a powerful symbol of their unfaithfulness to God and their casual treatment of the things of God. Consequently, Malachi began a new section of teaching in 2:17 and asserted God himself would bring justice. This section will be covered in our next lesson.