

Malachi--Meeting the Challenge of Spiritual Stagnation

The importance of affirming God's greatness

Intro: One of the challenges all spiritual people face are times of spiritual stagnation. Even when we want to keep increasing in faith, love, and hope there are times when we struggle. One book of the Bible in particular, I think, helps us meet this challenge--the book of Malachi.

As we noted in our first lesson, Malachi addresses a time in Israel's spiritual life when they had experienced what Baldwin called "*the imperceptible abrasion of faith that ends in cynicism because it has lost touch with the living God.*" Malachi, as God's prophet, speaks to Israel in dialogue style to address the causes and symptoms of their spiritual malaise. In our first study we saw that Israel had lost their sense of God's love; and we learned then the importance of affirming God's love in order to prevent spiritual stagnation.

Now let's look at the second dialogue.

The second dialogue (addressed specifically to the priests)

"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 Thy name?' "You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say, 'How have we defiled Thee?' In that you say, 'The table of the Lord is to be despised.' "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. "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. "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. "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. "But you are profaning it, in that you say, 'The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.' "You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the Lord of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery, and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the Lord. "But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock, and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the Lord of hosts, "and My name is feared among the nations." (Mal. 1:6-14)

Thinking through the conversation

God's message is addressed to the priests. They had enjoyed the privilege of having the closest access to God's presence by serving in His temple. They were entrusted with teaching God's law to the people and carrying out the worship of God. Yet they had lost respect for God and the sense of privilege that they enjoyed.

"You have despised my name!"

God indicates that though He is Israel's father and master, they have given him neither the honor of a son or the respect of a servant. Instead He affirms that the priests have "despised His name."

God's name stands for all that He is, His character and deeds.

"Despise" expresses the opposite of the respect that the priests should have shown.

But as is often the case, the priests cannot see how they have done this. Thus, they ask,

"How have we despised your name?"

God answers, "You are presenting defiled food upon my altar."

In conception, the altar represented the "table" of the Lord's house; and therefore God accommodatively refers to those offerings as His "food" or "bread" (Lev. 21:6). But the priests were offering "defiled" food. Nothing associated with sickness and death could enter God's holy space; but the priests have allowed what would be considered "defiled" or "unclean" into God's courts.

From the institution of the Law, God had given specific instructions about what offerings should be offered. But one of the principle features of all offerings was that they were to be "unblemished" or "perfect" animals (Cf. Lev. 22:17-20). The priests ignored this, allowing the worshippers to bring the blind, lame, and sick for sacrifice.

God points out that they are giving Him, Israel's king, what they would not even give to their own governor. They knew it would be an insult to him, but they feel free to offer it to God. Could they expect Him to receive them any more favorably than a human ruler to whom they gave sick, sub-standard gifts?

He would rather the temple be closed down than for it to be a place where He is dishonored:

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. (Mal. 1:10)

But the priests counter God's response, "But how have we defiled you?"

It is almost as if the priests say, "Yes, we gave you second-rate offerings; but how does that affect you personally?"

The priests show a shocking lack of perception about what sacrifices represent, namely, the esteem that the worshippers feel for God. The unlawful and second-rate offerings reflected a lack of respect for God Himself. In fact, God had made it clear in the Law that such sacrifices would "profane His name" (Lev. 22:2, 32).

But you are profaning it, in that you say, 'The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.' You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the Lord of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery, and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the Lord. (Mal. 1:12-13)

Apparently the priests had lost all appreciation for their role not only in offering the sacrifices, but also receiving a portion of them for their food. They were tired of the "same old, same old" as we say. They are weary of the task, bored with the repetition; and they show the signs of their repulsion at their tasks: "It is tiresome...you disdainfully sniff..."

But God affirms that humans cannot alter who He is; and that He will receive the honor that is due Him, if not by these Israelite priests, then by the other peoples of the world.

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. (Mal. 1:11)

God reaffirms His greatness and worthiness to be honored; and pledges that He will be honored, if not by His chosen people then by those "goyim" (nations) who His chosen people have looked so disdainfully upon. We need not imagine, as many premillennialists, that God will at some future time restore temple worship in Israel; but instead that God expresses the future worship of the nations in terms of the present practice in Israel.

And as for those whom the priests have allowed to vow an unblemished animal and then present a blemished one, God declares His curse upon them:

"But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock, and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the Lord of hosts, "and My name is feared among the nations." (Mal. 1:14)

Note the word "swindler." When people fail to give God His due, they are cheating him.

Learning from the conversation

God's message to the OT priests is relevant to us as well. For all of us are to use Peter's words "a holy nation and a royal priesthood" (1 Pet. 2:9) you also, as living stones, are being built up as a spiritual house for a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. (1 Pet. 2:5)

We no longer, of course, offer animals; but instead we offer ourselves as "living sacrifices."

I urge you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship. (Rom. 12:1)

Our whole life is an offering to God; but more specifically:

Through Him then, let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that give thanks to His name. And do not neglect doing good and sharing; for with such sacrifices God is pleased. (Heb. 13:15-16)

Does our service and worship reflect the honor that God deserves as our father and master? Does it show both honor and fear? Do we give him our best?

The apostles urged God's people to live in a way that is commensurate with His greatness and the privileged position we have as His people:

I, therefore, the prisoner of the Lord, entreat you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling with which you have been called, (Eph. 4:1)

so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the Lord, to please Him in all respects, bearing fruit in every good work and increasing in the knowledge of God; (Col. 1:10)

just as you know how we were exhorting and encouraging and imploring each one of you as a father would his own children, so that you may walk in a manner worthy of the God who calls you into His own kingdom and glory. (1 Thes. 2:11-12)

The point here is not that by godly living we "deserve" or "merit" God's eternal rewards; but rather the greatness of God and our calling merit our most ardent efforts to serve, our very best given to Him.

Conclusion: If we are to meet the challenges of spiritual stagnation, we must not only keep affirming God's love for us, but also reflecting upon His greatness and the privilege of serving Him. Take time to reflect upon God's greatness as our creator, our Savior, and our judge; and let that sense of His greatness give you the greatest sense of privilege in serving in His spiritual tabernacle as one of His priests.