

For His Faithfulness

Malachi 2:10-16

Listen to this classic exchange between columnist Abigail Van Buren and a reader:

Dear Abby,

“I am in love and I am having an affair with two different women other than my wife. I love my wife but I love these other women too. Please tell me what to do, but don’t give me any that morality stuff.” Signed: Too much love for only one.

Dear Too much love for only one,

“The only difference between humans and animals is morality. Please write to a veterinarian.”

The moral dimension of human marriage and sexuality descends from God. Without any such restrictions, man is reduced to a mere mating animal, and the marriage covenant becomes meaningless. Today’s text speaks powerfully to covenant marriage, but those lessons appear in a broader context. Do we live faithfully with God? If we do, our marriages have a solid foundation upon which to build. If we do not know how to honor our covenant with God, then our lack of resolve in matters of faithfulness will likely infect the other important relationships of our lives.

One of the most authentic proofs of a passion for God is our faithfulness to Him. Many times, Israel had chased after foreign gods, abandoning JEHOVAH in the process. This always seemed to go hand in hand with their disobedience to God in the matter of intermarrying with foreigners. Many Jews in Jerusalem had spent seventy years as captives in Babylon and never envisioned themselves ever bowing to another idol. Still, they were once again drawing away from God by divorcing their lawful wives and marrying wives of pagan descent. Malachi spoke to turn the nation from repeating this mistake. But, he did not simply condemn the sinful acts. He connected the unfaithful acts to a core unwillingness of the nation to walk faithfully with God.

I. Core Faithfulness (10)

¹⁰Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our fathers by breaking faith with one another?

A. Fidelity and Infidelity Defy Compartmentalization

To break faith with others in a faith community is to profane our covenant with God Himself. As we develop the text further, we will also see that to ignore the covenant we share with God often weakens our resolve to treat others rightly. There is a strong link between our faithfulness to God and our faithfulness to others. Many people tell themselves that their loyalty to God has nothing to do with their failures in their human relationships. Malachi would have us rethink that.

“Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?” In Malachi’s mind, their common calling should have produced a common passion for the things of God, but self-centeredness knows no bounds. The priests had not set their hearts on honoring God’s name in how they conducted themselves, and the people followed their lead. It was only a matter of time before they all began to become similarly indifferent regarding their responsibilities to one another. When our passionate devotion to God slips, our sense of duty to others will likely slip as well.

When Jesus came, He would identify our love for God – heart, soul, mind and strength – as the greatest commandment in the Law, but He also said that there was another command like it: “Love your neighbor as yourself.” These were the crux of the Law and were actually inseparable commands, for the only practical and compelling demonstration we can make of our love for God is in the way we love others. One love proves the other, or as John would later put it:

... ²⁰If anyone says, “I love God,” yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen. ²¹And he has given us this command: Whoever loves God must also love his brother. – 1 John 4:20, 21

B. Infidelity in One Relationship Tends to Impact Other Relationships

Where there is a breakdown in human relationships, our communion with God suffers. Jesus told an audience to walk away from making a sacrifice to God if they knew of a human relationship that needed repair. One reason Peter told husbands to treat their wives with respect was so that nothing would hinder their prayers. Still, people today don’t see the connection. Philip Yancey tells of a friend, a professed Christian, who told him “that her husband did not measure up and she was actively looking for other men to meet her needs for intimacy.” Yancey writes:

“When Susan mentioned that she rose early each day to ‘spend an hour with the Father,’ I asked, ‘In your meetings with the Father, do any moral issues come up that might influence this pending decision about leaving your husband?’

“Susan bristled: ‘That sounds like the response of a white Anglo-Saxon male. The Father and I are into relationship, not morality. Relationship means being wholly supportive and standing alongside me, not judging.’”

The fact is God does judge matters of infidelity and integrity because they hurt others around us. Where there is a breakdown in our public integrity, innocent people in our lives suffer from the fallout. There is a commercial on TV that addresses the embarrassment and humiliation that insurance fraud brings upon a family. Speaking of his father, a young son angrily declares, “He’s a liar!” It’s just a script. The characters are just actors. I’ve seen it a dozen times. Still, it shakes me every time I hear it, because it is probably an apt description of the anger, the hurt and the shame that one person’s sinful actions have brought down upon the heads of those around him.

When our walk with God is not marked by integrity, we damage our witness where it is needed most. We may articulate masterful lectures, but if honoring God is not our heart’s desire, the people in our lives will see through us. People more readily follow bad examples than good ones for bad examples make good excuses for the things they do. If insipid devotion to God is what they see, then insipid devotion to God is likely what they will imitate. But, if true passion for God is patterned in our lives, there may come a time when others embrace that same passionate love for God that we have modeled for them. The most fruitful way to live is to live before the eyes of God and before the eyes of the world as the same person. Faithfulness is faithfulness.

II. Covenant Faithfulness (11, 12)

¹¹Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god. ¹²As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob – even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty.

A. Judah Was Still Ignoring an Ancient Warning

One of the earliest and most oft-repeated commands God gave to the Israelites was for them to maintain their purity as a people by not intermarrying with the pagans that lived around them:

... ³Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, ⁴for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you. – Deuteronomy 7:3, 4

In spite of these words, the Israelites seemed to believe that this whole intermarriage hang-up God had was overblown. They decided that they knew better than God. Solomon had hundreds of foreign wives, and his appeasement of them introduced all sorts of pagan worship to Israel. Jezebel, the daughter of a foreign king, had been raised on Baal worship, and one of Israel's kings took her for a bride. She turned out to be the wickedest queen in Israel's history. Constant disobedience in this matter of intermarriage and the infiltration of God's people by paganism resulted in the destruction of the northern kingdom of Israel and a severe punishment of Judah.

Even after the Babylonian captivity, God's people still thought that intermarriage was no big deal. They still refused to believe that it would drag them down from their status as a holy people set apart for God. But the issue remained so critical that through Malachi, the LORD commanded that anyone who intermarried had to be "cut off" or excommunicated from the community.

B. What Are the Risks When Believers Marry Unbelievers?

In this day and age, marriages especially need something of substance on which to build. A young man presented his girlfriend with a ring and said: "I love you and I want you to marry me. I don't have a nice car like my best friend, Johnny Green. I don't have his yacht or a house as big as his. I don't have Johnny Green's money, but I love you with all my heart." She looked into his eyes and said, "I love you too, but can you tell me more about Johnny Green?"

Many Christians today still believe that they can overcome the obstacles of marrying an unbeliever. Blinded by the notion of being madly in love, they figure they will either conquer the odds or they will convert the other person. They choose a romantic passion over obeying God.

¹⁴Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? ¹⁵What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? ¹⁶What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: "I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people. – 2 Corinthians 6:14-16

When a believer charges forward and chooses passion for another person over their passion for God, that willfulness denies the importance of faith in Christ. There is no common spiritual ground for facing life's joys and struggles. All a believer can hope for is a secular relationship built on worldly goals and aspirations that do not take Christ into account. An unbeliever cannot possibly see marriage as a believer sees it, for a believer is taught to see it as a mystery that reflects the intimate union that exists between Jesus and His bride, the church.

I am not suggesting that such marriages cannot survive. Many do. I do not suggest that they cannot be loving. Many are. I do maintain, however, that such marriages cannot facilitate a believer's pursuit of holiness, but, rather, will present a chronic set of challenges to that pursuit. Paul commanded believers to stay put in their marriages to unbelievers, for that is the most likely avenue for their coming to faith. But, for those who are not married but are considering marriage, obedience demands that you limit the field to those who share your faith in the Lord Jesus Christ.

III. Conjugal Faithfulness (13–16)

¹³Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. ¹⁴You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth, because you have broken faith with her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

¹⁵Has not the LORD made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.

¹⁶"I hate divorce," says the LORD God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the LORD Almighty.

So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

A. These Jews Were Discarding Covenant Wives to Marry Pagan Women

There were two marital sins prevalent in Judah. Men were marrying foreign wives but in the process, they were also getting rid of their current wives, the wives of their youth, the wives with whom they had entered into a covenant in the presence of man and God. How could they claim to be covenant keepers with God if they were not covenant keepers in regard to their own wives?

This is how Malachi paints the picture. A conflict was going on at the altar of God. Men were wailing and carrying on because they perceived that God was not accepting their offerings. In other words, God was not pleased with them. But, how could God express His pleasure with them when, at the very same time, the altar was flooded with other tears, the tears of wives that they had "put away" so that they could chase after other women? God was not blessing the men because he was a "witness" to the grievances of their abandoned wives. How can anyone seek God's blessing when he has heartlessly sent someone else running to the Lord in tears?

They had "broken faith" with their wives. The *KJV* and the *NASV* say that they had "dealt treacherously" with their wives. We deal treacherously and we break faith with others when we twist God's Words to our own advantage, using them to weasel out of an obligation. The Law of Moses established a divorce provision in the event a woman was found to be guilty of something "indecent". Clearly, God had in mind that which violated her part in the covenant, usually some sexual sin or at the very least, some humiliating, shameful and scandalous indiscretion.

The men of Malachi's day were probably pioneering a word game that was to be mastered by the Pharisees of Jesus' day. They were defining "indecent" however they needed to define it. A wife may have become ill or overweight. Perhaps, she had dared to disagree with her husband. She may have been a bad cook. She may simply have grown older and not quite as cute as that little pagan number he had his eye on. Men were watering-down the divorce provision in the Law and dismissing their wives for capricious reasons, often leaving them in perilous economic danger.

B. God Intends for Covenant Marriages of One Man and One Woman to Last

On their 50th wedding anniversary, a couple summed up the reason for their long and happy marriage. The husband said, "I have tried never to be selfish. After all, there is no 'I' in the word 'marriage.'" The wife said, "For my part, I have never corrected my husband's spelling."

Even among Israel's patriarchs, judges and kings, multiple wives were no novelty. I do not know why God endured this behavior as He patiently forged His nation. Still, just because polygamy was practiced does not mean that God was pleased, and it was not this way at the beginning. God created Adam, and from Adam's side, He brought forth Eve. Adam concluded: "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh." (Genesis 2:23). And, the narrative continues:

For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and they will become one flesh. – Genesis 4:24

Several billion women have crossed the world's stage since the world was created. God could have created any number of them early and given them to Adam at one time, but that was not what He pictured. Malachi says that they were made "one," because God was seeking "godly offspring." The world winks at the prevalence of divorce, adultery, cohabitation, children born out of wedlock. It is even trying to get used to the idea of adoption by same-sex couples. I trust that no matter what you've been through personally, you can still see that a loving, committed, covenant marriage between a man and a woman is still in the best interest of raising righteous children.

Malachi says that God hates divorce and violence. The world today cannot recognize this equity between divorce and violence, but in God's mind, what was occurring in Judah was destructive not only to women and children, but also to the nation at large. There is still a violent dimension to even the friendliest of divorces. Somebody has to endure deep and scarring hurts, if only the children. Divorce especially does violence to the picture of what a covenant should look like.

I have prayed that I might be able to bring all the compassion and grace God can awaken in me to this issue, because I know how dramatically divorce has affected even the people of God. George Barna tells us that the current divorce rate among Christians is 27%, higher than the 23% divorce rate among non-Christians. I suspect that the numbers are skewed because of the rate of co-habitation among non-Christians. Still, a 27% divorce rate among Christians should tell us that we must do a better job of communicating the biblical picture of marriage to God's people.

But the crux of the issue is simpler than just teaching about marriage. Believers need to develop God's own virtue of faithfulness and bring it to all of their relationships, especially the one they share with Him. God never breaks His oath. God loves us to the uttermost. God promises us that He will never leave or forsake us and that nothing can ever sever us from His love. Pursue that dynamic of faithfulness in all your commitments, whether it is a marriage covenant, an employment contract or simply the promises you utter to others with your mouth. Be faithful as God is faithful.