

## **Malachi: Useless Fires and God's Greatness**

*Malachi 1:6-14*

**Preached by Rev. Craig T. Smith on January 14, 2024.**

### **Weak Coffee**

If you are a coffee drinker, you know what weak coffee tastes like. Every coffee drinker has tossed a weak cup of coffee into the trash bin at some point. Maybe you were even offended a bit because you paid for the cup and expected to get what you paid for!

Humans are wired to want the best. We don't want second-best, lukewarm, weakened, watered down coffee. We don't want second-best or "good enough" in anything, do we? Do you want to settle for "good enough" toothpaste? Do you want something that is just "fine" when you know you can have something better, something more?

This morning, we turn to Malachi chapter 1 to see God confront Israel about some areas that they are being sinful and wicked in their covenantal relationship with God. I invite you to Malachi 1:6-14 this morning. (read text)

### **Honor and Reverence**

After the introduction and the declaration and proof of God's love for a rebellious and petulant Israel, Malachi now addresses the issue of sacrifice and worship. The first section of Malachi 1 opens with a disputation in which God says he loves his people, and they dispute it. The second section begins with the next disputed point between God and the people. God asks his people where is the honor and reverence due him and the people fire back with "How have we insulted you?" The Lord will now draw attention to the worship and the sacrifices offered by the people as proof that they do not honor or revere the Lord.

Sacrifice was established as a loving response to love received. After the Israelites returned from exile in Babylon, the temple was rebuilt under Ezra. But not long after its re-construction, the people soon fell into their disobedient ways. You see, human nature tends to forget previous lessons learned, making the reteaching of things necessary.

God expected his people to make sacrifices and that offerings would be taken from his good gifts and returned back to Him.

These offerings represented a person's love, loyalty, honor, and, at times, sorrow for sin and wrongdoing (see Lev. 1-7). These offerings revealed a person's inner commitment and loyalty to the covenant relationship between God and the people. Sacrifice was not about duty or obligation. Sacrifice came out of devotion.

When duty replaces devotion, people have the tendency to meet that obligation or duty if minimum steps. They do barely enough, or just enough to get by. My dad used to refer to this as "close enough for jazz." Meaning that "good enough was fine." Except good enough, fine, in the realm of our spiritual devotion to the Lord is opposite to the covenant relationship that God has made with us. God did the maximum for both Israel and for us. When people then and now reply with "good enough" worship or service or offerings, it is clearly an issue of losing track of one's first love. When you forget the Lord as your first love, you tend to assume that "good enough" is the correct approach to your worship and offering. Israel has forgotten their first love. Israel has stopped walking in covenantal loyalty to the Lord. And what does God point to as evidence that they have insulted him? Their offerings. Their sacrifices.

God establishes a context to help the people understand how they are supposed to relate to God. He begins with children honoring parents. The verb form of "honors" indicates that this is an ongoing practice, not a one-time event. Honoring parents was baked into Israel from the very beginning. It is one of the Ten Commandments (Ex. 20:12; Deut. 5:16).

Honoring involves treating someone with respect, lifting them up, and showing that they have worth.

Then God moves from this first proposition of family honor on to the second one, the relationship between masters and servants. In this relationship there must be honor and respect showed to the master. Obedience to authority is expected, since it defines the relationship.

Building on these two foundations, that the people would have been familiar with, God moves on. God is their "Father" and their "Master." In other words, God is making it clear, telling the Israelites, "You should honor me." God expects to be honored. And yet, here in Malachi, there is no honor to be found. The people are not honoring God. They do not respect Him. They are not praising and magnifying God's greatness.

And it shows through their offering. God is their father and revealed his majestic Fatherhood to his people. And God is their master and has shown sovereign love for his people.

Malachi sees that there is no honor between father and son. Respect is lacking in the master-servant relationship. The people of Israel do not fear God. They are not in awe of Yahweh. God expects appropriate responses from his people. God expects his children to respond to their Father who is the very Creator and Sustainer of the universe. But he does not receive any.

Instead of respect, God receives contempt. Disrespect. Disdain. The people despise God and treat him lightly. They do not think God is worthy of their attention. Rather than maintaining the reputation of the holy God, the people insult it. When God accuses them of all of this, they respond like they did earlier. Arguing. Because the people simply cannot be wrong in all of this action. Because they are convinced in their own wisdom that they are right. They people deny the accusation and they want God to prove it.

### **Answers Demanded**

God then provides them the answer. He deals with their response by directing their attention to their worship, their offerings. God has charged his people to bring appropriate or “right” sacrifices. He established clear guidelines. undefiled. Spotless (Ex. 12:5; 29:1). Without blemish (Lev. 22:21; Num. 19:2). And yet, there is a continual unacceptable quality to the worship and sacrifices of the people. Instead of obeying God’s word, they have been offering up inferior worship and “good enough” offerings.

God says, “Fine, you want proof? You are bringing defiled offerings.” And the people again dispute with God. “How have we defiled YOU?” It is an interesting response. They are admitting that they KNOW that the offerings and the worship are defiled. They know they are wrong in that regard. They are being both cheap and sinful by bringing these useless sacrifices to the Lord. But they want to know what the quality of the worship and offering matters so much to God. “We’re bringing you something. That should be good enough for you. You should be glad you’re getting something.”

God follows that up with irony. How would the local state governor respond to their gifts? Are they suitable for him? “Try to get away with disrespecting the governor like you do me,” God tells the people.

Could you imagine if we had the same attitude toward the IRS or the HOA that we do toward God? “Hey, we know that our taxes should be paid in full, but instead we’ve decided to pay about a fourth of it. Hey, be happy you’re getting that much!” Or “You know, we don’t really like the president of the Homeowner’s Association, so we are just not going to pay our dues for this year.” Now you’re saying, “Pastor, those examples are ridiculous. Of course we would pay our taxes and our HOA dues. Those things impact our lives, and we care about our families and, besides, it is the law!” God is saying to Israel (and to us), “Okay, so to be clear: The Sovereign Lord and Eternal Father is less important than temporary dues and property taxes.”

The truth is, for many Christians, God is less important than a lot of things. He is less important than a person’s vacation schedule. He is less important than a person’s social calendar. He is less important than a clothes hamper or a kitchen pantry. A lot of people find God to be less important than so many things. God is challenging whether or not the behavior here is acceptable. He says it is not.

Further, God says, “I would rather the temple doors be closed, and a gone fishing sign hung up in the window if this is how you are going to worship and offer up sacrifices. Instead of burning useless fires and going through religious motions that are meaningless, instead of offering these ‘good-enough’ sacrifices, just lock the doors and go home.” God says that would protect the people from committing further unacceptable acts.

Did you see how God described these offerings, these fires they are burnt upon? Useless. Cheap. Pointless. Meaningless. Better to not even be in the building than to worship this way and offer up cheapened offerings.

The sacrifices were costing the people nothing. They had acceptable animals in the herd, but they were too expensive to bring to God. Let him have the broken and blind one. That is good enough.

When we offer meaningless, cheap, “good enough” worship and offerings, God says that his altar becomes defiled. The worship becomes contemptible. We profane God when we assume that our worship and our offering has to do with anything else other than our covenant relationship with God. It doesn’t. Oh, you can try to make it about some other outside source. But it always gets back to your heart issue between you and God.

“Well, I cannot really give back to the Lord because there is just so much else that we have to do. We have the bills to pay, the kids are growing so fast, the car needs this, and the backyard needs that. Besides, we travel so much. We could do more if everything wasn’t so expensive.” We forget that it was God, not our social schedule, that provided everything that we have. We are more than happy to cut off huge slices of our lives for things that are fun, enjoyable, but not eternal. And then, well, that little bit we tossed in the bucket, that ought to be enough.

Or maybe we say, “I don’t like what he said up there in the pulpit, so I am not coming and I’m not offering anything.” That implies that your devotion to the Lord is based on worldly things. When you blame some outside source for your meaningless worship and your cheap offering, you are trying to convince yourself that your disobedience to the Lord is not really your fault. Except it is. Because our worship and our offering has nothing to do with anything else except God. It is all in your own heart. You see, God doesn’t need you to praise Him. He has divine aseity. He doesn’t need the applause of the grasshoppers. And God doesn’t need you to show him the money because he needs anything.

You are to extend worship and offering because you are in a covenant relationship with God. Period. No other outside anything matters. God would rather you stop pretending to be faithful to a covenant relationship that isn’t that important and stay home and not offer anything.

In response to this, the people say in v. 13, “This isn’t that good.” Or to quote the old 60’s song, “It’s kind of a drag.” The people continue to complain after God lays out how the worship and offering are contemptible. The people feel put upon. God says that they scorn the idea of bringing sacrifices. In many translations, it reads “snorting” or “sniffing contemptuously” at the thought of having to bring acceptable sacrifices.

The people express their contempt to God nonverbally. This inner contempt is revealed by their outward actions. They decide to bring unacceptable worship and offerings.

When your sacrifice doesn’t cost you much, it isn’t a sacrifice. Don’t consider it a sacrifice. Call it a tip or call it charity or call it a cosmic hand out. But don’t call it sacrifice.

For a long time, throughout history, God's people have often been accused of offering unacceptable offering and worship. Worship becomes an empty ritual. A thing you do because it is a thing you have always done. Empty rituals are the byproduct of bored hearts and lifeless faith. Every week, we have the opportunity to enter into worship of the living God and offer up acceptable, sacrificial worship. It may mean singing a song you don't like. It may mean giving up something that changes how you plan and live your life.

I remember back in high school sitting next to my friend Dan Bergdall in worship one Sunday morning. They were passing the offering plates and Dan pulled out his wallet to pay his offering. Dan had a job and got paid pretty decently for a high school kid. The plate came and I sat it in his lap, and he was in a dilemma. He had a \$100 and two \$20's. However, he later told me the dilemma was that a tithe would have been \$65, and he only had those three bills. He closed his eyes and put all three in the plate and sent it on. Dan's decision wasn't to do any math. It was to acknowledge that God was worthy of all that he had. Two days later, Dan received a surprise check from his grandmother in the mail saying that some mineral rights money came through for them so she thought she would bless him with some of it because he works so hard. She had cut him a check for \$150.

Giving all of that money was a sacrifice for Dan. But it was a sacrifice directed to the Lord, not to me, not to the church, not to Dan's personal sense of piety. It was a sacrifice to the Lord. When we enter worship, when we offer sacrifices of praise, service, tithes, or more, we are not doing that for any other reason than the covenantal relationship we have with God.

True worship comes from a heart that treasures and loves God above all human property and human praise. It understands that God shows sovereign love for his people, and he is the majestic Heavenly Father to his people. Because of that, he deserves authentic, appropriate, sacrificial worship.

Are you bored with God? When we are bored with God, it allows the love of this world and its stuff to overwhelm us. You see, our hearts are restless in the treasure department. We are always looking for something to love and value. If we don't value God, then it becomes this world.

Today, offer again to God appropriate worship and sacrifice. He loves you. He is your true and faithful Father. Should we expect the Sovereign Lord and Eternal Father to accept second-best worship, “good enough” offerings? Besides, “good enough” seldom is.