

SMALL GROUP GUIDE



MALACHI: **GIVING GOD YOUR ATTENTION**

"Class, turn with me in your textbooks to page 102," I remarked before a recognizable sound caught my attention. The principal's noisy keyring was jingling down the hallway like Santa's sleigh carrying coal. I knew what was coming. Every teacher's worst nightmare: it was observation day. My principal poked his head into the door and asked if he could sit in on my class. "Of course," I remarked, since "no, thank you" was not an option. Stage fright consumed me. I stuttered, struggled, and slowly worked through the material while his pencil scribbled across a bright yellow notebook.

The bell rang and my students left in a frenzy. My principal walked up to me and remarked, "your slide presentation was really sharp." Uh oh, I knew what that meant. If he was kicking off with a compliment, that meant that a correction was coming. After the shallow compliment, he went on to critique my lesson plan and criticize my lecture. It was a mess. Every note felt personal while every compliment felt forced. I felt like garbage after that meeting. I sulked over a cup of coffee while reworking my lesson plans for the rest of the semester. Ultimately, I applied every critique and implemented changes to overcome them. A few months later, my observation went a lot better. I got near-perfect marks. This is not to brag, but it's to say that constructive criticism is valuable when taken seriously and detrimental when ignored.

The last book of the Old Testament, Malachi, reads like an annual review gone wrong. Constructive criticism dominates the pages. Malachi was written during Israel's dark ages. He served during a period of ancient history plagued with corruption in the religious institutions, compromised leadership, agnosticism, and impending signs of destruction. Malachi calls God's people to get serious about God... or else.

To quote my grandmother — "No, it's not a threat, it's a promise."

Using a question-and-answer writing style, similar to Habakkuk, Malachi calls Israel to embrace authenticity, reject arrogance, and embody true worship. God's voice in Malachi is stern and concerned. God wants His people to know that he empathizes with their struggle, but He doesn't condone their behavior. They turned to false gods, took advantage of the weak, and mocked religious services. Sure, they seemed obedient with their hands, but their hearts were polluted. In reaction, God gave them a performance review.

READ: Malachi 1:2-5

“I have loved you,” says the Lord. “But you ask, ‘How have you loved us?’ Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.” Edom may say, “Though we have been crushed, we will rebuild the ruins.” But this is what the Lord Almighty says: “They may build, but I will demolish. They will be called the Wicked Land, a people always under the wrath of the Lord. You will see it with your own eyes and say, ‘Great is the Lord—even beyond the borders of Israel!’

There you have it — one of the harshest passages in the entire Bible. Malachi chapter one is one of the only places in scripture where the word “hate” comes up in connection to God. Sounds serious, right? The prophet uses intense language because the problem is intense. God hates rebellion. God hates wickedness. God hates anything that comes between His people and Him. However, God's harshness stems from His holiness. That's why He corrects Israel in a way that shows He cares and calls for their attention. We see four corrections in chapter one and each is paired with an affirmation that reveals God's heart.

Here they are:

Affirmation	Correction
1. I have loved you (v. <u>2</u>).	1. Where is My honor? (v. <u>6</u>).
2. I have chosen you (v. <u>2</u>).	2. You defiled My altar (vv. <u>7</u> , <u>8</u>).
3. I will defeat your enemies (vv. <u>3</u> , <u>4</u>).	3. You act like My enemy (v. <u>10</u>).
4. I will be magnified worldwide (v. <u>5</u>).	4. You’ve profaned My name (v. <u>12</u>).

These statements offer us two principles to encourage us when we face God's conviction and correction.

God Corrects Us to Show He Cares

God's correction is clear, but so is His heart. God cares for His people and wants the best for them. God precedes every challenge with an affirmation that proves the reason behind His correction. God wants to be deeply connected to his people. That's the reason behind the conviction. Take a look at all the affirmations attached to their condemnations. Why does God want them to turn from their destructive ways? Because He loves them (1:2). Why does God want them to take His Word more seriously? Because they're becoming no different than their enemies (1:12). Why does God want them to honor Him? Because He is supreme, and every other god will let them down (1:5). God corrects us because He cares for us.

As a teenager, I was not the best driver. This was before I had learned I needed special glasses, so driving at night was sort of like driving with a blindfold. Late one evening, while I was swerving my way home, blue lights strobed behind my car. I pulled over and a concerned officer asked why I was all over the highway. He probably suspected drinking, but quickly saw that I was just a scared teenager with eye problems. With compassion, he wrote me a warning ticket and followed me home. The next day, I made an appointment at the eye doctor. Now, I have the correct glasses, which protect me and everyone else on the road. When the officer corrected me, he was actually protecting me.

God corrects us in order to protect us. It sounds weird, but Praise God for gentle punishments. Yes, you heard that right. God's grace-filled punishments are far better than the extreme consequences that await us. God probably allowed that relationship to break into pieces because it was bad for you. God likely allowed you to get caught in that lie in order to prevent you from doing that again. God may have prompted your parent to discover that stuff in your pocket to protect you.

Do you see it? Punishments often lead to protection. Yes, corrections are hard, but they're also beneficial. They help us grow in holiness, integrity, and purity. That's God's heart for His children -- both the Israelites and you.

God Corrects Us to Shift Our Attention

When God is warning Israel of what awaits them, He announces, "You will see it with your own eyes and say, 'Great is the Lord—even beyond the borders of Israel!' (1:5)

God's people had become complacent in their worship. They offered empty sacrifices and refused to give God the glory for all they had been given. This was illustrated by the fact that most of them had refused to contribute to the temple or deliver adequate offerings at the altar. Their focus was in the wrong place, which led God to snap His cosmic fingers to get their attention.

God wants your attention and affection. Take the warning given to ancient Israel here. Whenever life knocks you over, pay attention, as God may be flagging you down. When life puts you on your back, be sure to look up to heaven. Does your mind drift off during worship services? Perhaps you're getting distracted by life's demands, your school work, or even the person sitting next to you. All of those things are good, but they're not God.

Shift your attention. Maybe the news has turned into an obsession. Maybe success has blinded you to anything else. Maybe you can only think about yourself, what you want to achieve, and where you want to be.

Don't fall for the same trap that captured Israel and required Malachi to write his prophecies. Israel's attention and affections were out of wack, leading to big problems. Take an honest inventory of where your attention and affection intersect. Anything that holds your attention ultimately holds your affection. Ensure your affection goes in the right direction — towards a caring God who will never let you down. Turn your gaze to God. Focus your attention on Him. Worship Him with all your heart. Like Malachi affirms, He's wholly worthy of your attention and affection.

TALK IT OUT

Go through these questions with your circle. Be honest. Be open. Talk through the tough stuff.

Ice Breaker: Go around your circle and share this week's highs and lows. What was the best part of your week and what was the lowest part of your week?

Q1: What's one thing that stood out to you from today's message?

Q2: What message did Malachi have for the people of Israel?

Q3: How can God's corrections actually demonstrate he cares?

Q4: What are 3 things that consume your attention and affection?

Q5: How can you ensure that you don't prioritize those things above God?

Application: What's one thing you can do every day this week to shift your focus onto God?

READING PLAN

READ THESE PASSAGES IN ORDER EVERY DAY

Isaiah 41:10

Luke 12:22-26

Psalm 118:6-7

Psalm 91:1-16

1 Samuel 3:7-10

Psalm 32:1-7

Philippians 1:6

Colossians 1:10

Habakuk 3:19

Do the following with each passage:

ASK– God to connect with you here. In prayer, start by slowing down and inviting God to be present. Begin with focus and openness to see what God has for you today.

READ– the selected section of Scripture slowly. Take note of the words and phrases that intrigue you, reading them a second time if necessary.

REFLECT– on what grabs you. How does this passage personally relate to your own life and experiences?

RESPOND– to the Scripture. Speak directly to God about what's on your mind and heart. Look for ways to live out what you've uncovered.