

Traditionally on the Sunday after Christmas I like to do a sermon that is New Years focused, as we look back at the year that was and look ahead to the coming year. This year, I want to share a passage from Malachi 1:6-14.

Malachi was a prophet who lived around the year 450 BC. The historical context is that Israel has been conquered by the Babylonians and taken off into captivity in what is known as the exile. Under King Cyrus, they are allowed to return and rebuild Jerusalem, which we read about in the books of Nehemiah and Ezra. As you might imagine, hopes were very high in Israel upon their return. They rebuilt the wall of Jerusalem, rebuilt the temple, and expected that the promises of the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah would come to pass, that the Messiah would come and there would be a time of peace and justice in the land. But it didn't happen that way, at least not as quickly as they expected, and the community fell back into rebellion against God, into injustice and spiritual complacency. And that's when God raises up Malachi to be his prophet.

Old Testament prophets were known as covenant mediators. What does that mean? Remember that when God led the Israelites out of slavery in Egypt, he led them to Mt. Sinai, where he made a covenant with the people. A covenant is like a contract, an agreement between two people or parties, but with greater intimacy. Think of a marriage covenant – in one sense it is a contract, in that two people are coming into agreement with each other about their relationship in a binding way before God and the government, but there is much greater intimacy in a marriage covenant than say an agreement between you and the Honda dealership when you buy a new care. Anyways, God made a covenant with Moses and the Israelites at Mt. Sinai, which was called the Mosaic covenant. I will be your God, and you will be my people. This is what it means to be my people – don't kill, don't steal, worship in these ways, care for the poor among you, and so on. And after these laws, or stipulations, would come the blessings and curses. If you follow these laws, you will experience blessings: prosperity, good crops, good health, peace, long life, and so on. If you disobey, you will bring upon yourself curses: famine, pestilence, plague, warfare, and so on.

So where does the covenant mediator prophet come in? Throughout Israel's history, they had a hard time following the laws of the Mosaic covenant. **And every time they were in danger of bringing upon themselves the curses of the covenant because of their disobedience, God would send a prophet, who would be God's mouthpiece to warn the people of their sins and to call them to repentance, to turn away from their sin and back to obedience.**

Now that we understand the context, let's read Malachi 1:6-14:

⁶ "A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?" says the LORD Almighty. "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name. "But you ask, 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' ⁷ "You place defiled food on my altar. "But you ask, 'How have we defiled you?' "By saying that the LORD's table is contemptible. ⁸ When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, **is that not wrong?** Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" **says the LORD Almighty.** ⁹ "Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?"-- says the LORD Almighty. ¹⁰ "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept **no offering from your hands.** ¹¹ My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty. ¹² "But you profane it by saying of the Lord's table, 'It is defiled,' and of its food, **'It is contemptible.'** ¹³ And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously," **says the LORD Almighty.** "When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?" says the LORD. ¹⁴ "Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be feared among the nations.

God says to the Israelites and particularly to their priests that they are His son, and He is their father, but that they are not showing him respect or honor. When they question how, he points to the offerings they are giving of defiled food, blind animals, crippled and diseased sacrifices. They are not bringing God their first fruits, the best of their flock, but rather the leftovers, the scraps, and the parts of their flock that will not cost them much.

For those unfamiliar with the Old Testament sacrificial system, this is what was expected of them when they came to the temple to worship:

Leviticus 1:2-3 – "Speak to the Israelites and say to them: 'When any of you brings an offering to the LORD, bring as your offering an animal from either the herd or the flock. If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a

male without defect. He must present it at the entrance to the Tent of Meeting so that it will be acceptable to the LORD.’”

Leviticus 22:20-22 - *Do not bring anything with a defect, because it will not be accepted on your behalf. ²¹ When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the LORD to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable. ²² Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as an offering made to the LORD by fire.*

The expectation was that they would bring their best as an offering to God, but instead, they were bringing their leftovers, their scraps, the blind, injured, and maimed. I recognize that the idea of animal sacrifice seems foreign to many of us. What was the purpose of animal sacrifice? The people of Israel were continually sinning against God and against others, doing evil and polluting the land. The sacrificial system was provided by God as a way to atone for their sins, to deal with the evil in their midst. **They had to offer an animal from their own herd or flock, and it needed to be one without defect, because it needed to cost them something, so that they could understand the seriousness of their sin and recognize the graciousness of God’s provision of a substitute.** The animal would die in their place; his life for theirs, and the blood would help cleanse the land so that a holy God could remain with them.

So if that is the case, then what do you think would be communicated by offering a defective animal? Offering a maimed sacrifice communicates that the one giving does not comprehend the absolute perfection of God and the seriousness of their sin. Or it reveals that a person does not trust God to provide, so the giver feels the need to withhold his best animals.

God continues by giving them an analogy – **“try offering such pitiful animals to your governor!”** Think about it. How would you treat a celebrity in your midst? What if Tom Brady, or Taylor Swift, or someone else you admired were to show up to our church. What kind of respect, deference, and honor would you give to him or her? Would you not treat them with the utmost respect and do your best to treat them with honor? Why, God asks, do you show me less honor than that?

The bottom line is that their cheap offerings reflect their attitudes towards God. And God tells them this:

¹⁰ "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands."

In other words, God tells His people that **He would prefer them to offer no worship at all than to give Him worthless or half-hearted worship.** It would be better to close the temple than to open it up to this kind of dishonor.

So, to sum up, the sacrifices the Israelites were making to God revealed their attitude towards God and their trust – or lack of trust – in Him. And God tells them that he would rather they just shut the doors to the temple than continue to offer Him their leftovers. He tells them that His name will be great, whether or not they choose to honor Him.

Now, as you have probably noticed, we no longer bring animals to church to sacrifice. The New Testament book of Hebrews tells us that the animal sacrifices offered under the old covenant, which were a reminder of the holiness of God and the seriousness of sin, ultimately were meant to point to the true sacrifice for sin, Jesus on the cross.

***Hebrews 10:1-4, 11-14** -The law is only a shadow of the good things that are coming-- not the realities themselves. For this reason it can never, by the same sacrifices repeated endlessly year after year, make perfect those who draw near to worship. ² If it could, would they not have stopped being offered? For the worshipers would have been cleansed once for all, and would no longer have felt guilty for their sins. ³ But those sacrifices are an annual reminder of sins, ⁴ because it is impossible for the blood of bulls and goats to **take away sins**... Day after day every priest stands and performs his religious duties; again and again he offers the same sacrifices, which can never take away sins. ¹² But when this priest [Jesus] had offered for all time one sacrifice for sins, he sat down at the right hand of God. ¹³ Since that time he waits for his enemies to be made his footstool, ¹⁴ because by one sacrifice he has made perfect forever those who are being made holy.*

Jesus paid the penalty for our sins once and for all by His death on the cross. He took on himself the curses from the Mosaic covenant. The old covenant is now obsolete. Now, under the new covenant, all who repent of their sins and trust in Jesus are forgiven and have eternal life. So, no need to offer sacrifices any more, right? Wrong. We just offer a different kind of sacrifice:

Romans 12:1-2 - Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God-- this is your spiritual act of worship.

In view of God's mercy, in light of the gospel, that God has forgiven your sins through Jesus' death, offer your bodies – your lives – to God as living sacrifices. Not dead animals, but living humans, on the metaphorical altar, as our act of worship to God. We do not sacrifice in order to gain forgiveness from God, but because we have been forgiven, as a response to the one who loves us and knows what is best for us. We do not owe him a bull or goat; we owe everything to Him.

Today is the final day of 2023, a time when traditionally we take stock of how we have lived over the past year and resolve to improve ourselves in the coming year. My prayer this morning is that you would let this passage be a mirror held up to your life, that you might ask yourself about what you are offering to God in your life, what you sacrifice to Him. **If you are willing to be honest with yourself, do you think that God might say the same to you – or to our church – today that He said to the Israelites?** Are there ways in which you, or we, are like the Israelites, not treating God with the honor and respect that He is due, but instead giving Him the leftovers, the scraps of your life as your offering? Is He your priority in life, or is He an afterthought? Consider a few specific areas of your life:

What about your time? Do you offer Him priority in your day? Do you seek Him first, showing by your actions and your time that He is most important to you, that you belong to Him, that He is the source of your strength, and that you want your life to bring Him honor?

Is God the priority in your day? How many other apps and inputs do you turn to first before you turn to Him or to His Word? What does that reveal about your heart and what you desire or what you think about God? What would it look like if you opened up the Bible, or the Bible app on your phone first?

And is He the priority in your life? Think about how easily we can sit through a two- or three-hour sporting event or concert, or watch hours of videos and television shows, and yet God is an afterthought. And then we say that we are too busy to find time to spend with God. Or think about your attitude towards Sunday morning. Do you come early, preparing your heart to hear from Him and to give Him the praise He deserves? Or is church something that only happens if everything comes together? To paraphrase God in Malachi, is that how you would treat a celebrity if they were coming to your church?

Maybe it's no wonder that we experience so little of the power and reality of God in our lives when we treat Him with such dishonor, offering Him the leftovers and scraps of our day.

What would it look like if you began your day in communication with Him before you began to interact with anyone else? What if your desire for Him was so paramount that by comparison, you hated everything and everyone else vying for your attention? What do you think He could do in your life if you honored Him with your time and made Him your priority?

And what about your talents? God has given you talents and abilities, gifts, and energy. Where are you using those? Remember what Peter wrote:

1 Peter 4:10 - Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God's grace in its various forms.

Are you using any of them in service to Him and to others? Or have you treated them like they are your own, to be used on yourself? What would it look like to not just use your gifts and talents on yourself but to use them in service to Him and to others?

There are many opportunities in the new year to serve others. Children's church, youth, the AV booth, worship, community groups, cards for others, visiting others, cleaning the church, making a meal, administrative help, serving your neighbor. Where can you offer Him not just the leftovers of your talents and gifts but your best?

And what about your treasure? Do you give Him your first fruits, the first of your earnings? Or are you concerned about everything else financially before you give to the Lord and to His church, only tithing or giving offerings if you have something left over? What would happen if you prioritized Him? What do you think would happen if you stepped out on faith and put Him first with your finances, trusting that He would take care of you? Go back to Malachi and listen to what God told the Israelites:

Malachi 3:10 - Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the LORD Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that you will not have room enough for it.

And while we are no longer under the old covenant, God still rewards generosity:

2 Corinthians 9:6-11 - Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously. ⁷ Each man should give what he has decided in his heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver. ⁸ And God is able to make all grace abound to you, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work. ⁹ As it is written: "He has scattered abroad his gifts to the poor; **his righteousness endures forever.**" ¹⁰ Now he who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will also supply and increase your store of seed and will enlarge the harvest of your righteousness. ¹¹ You will be made rich in every way so that you can be generous on every occasion, and through us your generosity will result in thanksgiving to God.

As you consider what it will look like to sacrifice to the Lord and worship Him this year, consider this: **you can never outgive God.** If you struggle with generosity and sacrificing that which is of value, look to the cross. Remember that God already gave His best to you when you deserved death. And so, we can trust Him to provide everything we need.

Romans 8:31-32 - What, then, shall we say in response to this? If God is for us, who can be against us? ³² He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all-- how will he not also, along with him, **graciously give us all things?**

God already gave the perfect sacrifice in His Son when we did not deserve it. This is not a bloodthirsty God demanding a sacrifice. This is your Father, who has proven His love for you by giving His best, His Son, when you were His enemy. No matter what you sacrifice, you can never outgive God. He will always make sure that you are cared for.

Matthew 6:25-34 - "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or drink; or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more important than food, and the body more important than clothes? ²⁶ Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they? ²⁷ Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life? ²⁸ "And why do you worry **about clothes?** See how the lilies of the field grow. They do not labor or spin. ²⁹ Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendor was dressed like one of these. ³⁰ If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is

thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you, O you of little faith? ³¹ So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?' ³² For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them. ³³ But seek first his kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴ Therefore do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.

Seek first His kingdom, and He will care for you. Offer your time, talent and treasure to Him and see if He will not bless you and care for you as the good Father that He is. He gave you His Son when you were His enemy. Will He not take care of you now that you are His child?

So, in Malachi 1, God speaks through the prophet Malachi and tells the Israelites that they are dishonoring Him by offering Him their leftovers and scraps. What about you? Are you prioritizing God in your life, offering yourself as a living sacrifice, or are you offering Him your leftovers and scraps of your time, talent, and treasure as well, the diseased and blemished sacrifices, while keeping the best for yourself?

Next Sunday, we are beginning to fast for three weeks. This is a great opportunity to test God in what we are talking about this morning. Because it's one thing to proclaim "I am completely yours, God!" It's another thing to delete Facebook or Instagram for three weeks, or to stop buying things you don't need, or eating food. What would you give up in order to experience more of the Lord? **If you are unfamiliar with fasting, this is the heart of it:** you are giving your heart to lesser loves, your worship to lesser gods, finding comfort and joy in things that are ultimately meaningless. You are spending two hours every day playing a game on your phone that adds nothing of ultimate value to your life. You are spending your money buying things that you don't need. You are eating food that is not good for you and that make you slow and sluggish. You are looking to social media for validation and instead growing in bitterness and envy. You are trying to find your joy in sexual thrills but instead becoming addicted to something that will only destroy you and your relationships. You are spending every free moment taking in a barrage of information and entertainment through podcasts and YouTube videos and TikTok and drowning out God in the process.

Consider God's words spoken through Jeremiah:

Jeremiah 2:11-13 - *Has a nation ever changed its gods? (Yet they are not gods at all.) But my people have exchanged their Glory for worthless idols. ¹² Be appalled at this, O heavens, and shudder with great horror," declares the LORD. ¹³ "My people have committed two sins: They have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water.*

The heart of fasting is to replace those things that you are turning to with God. To turn to Him when you are hungry, or anxious, or looking for a thrill, or for validation. It is to feel that hunger pang but to say as Jesus said in **John 4:32 & 34**, *"I have food to eat that you know nothing about... my food is to do the will of him who sent me and to finish his work."* It is to feel the pull to social media or shopping or porn or podcasts and to declare, *"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full."* (**John 10:10**). The heart of fasting is to believe that there is absolutely nothing in this world that you can give up that God won't replace with something better. More of His presence, more of His joy, more of His peace, more of His power.

What are you putting your hope in? What are you trusting in to give what only God can provide? Turn from those things, fast from those things, and bring a real sacrifice to Him this year. Consider the words of Jonah:

Jonah 2:8-9 - *"Those who cling to worthless idols forfeit the grace that could be theirs. ⁹ But I, with a song of thanksgiving, will sacrifice to you. What I have vowed I will make good. Salvation comes from the LORD."*

You have held on to worthless idols. And by trusting in those things for your comfort, your joy, your validation, you have forfeited the grace of God that could be yours. Let this be the season when you, with a song of thanksgiving, sacrifice that idol to the Lord. Declare with me that salvation comes from the Lord and not from our idols.