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SERVING GOD THE LEFTOVERS

Malachi 1:6-14

By

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Malachi Lesson 2

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Malachi 1:6-14

When Jimmy Carter was President, on several occasions he spent the night in the homes of common Americans, picked at random. Suppose that the President and his wife decided to come to your home. The big evening arrives. Crowds line the streets as the presidential limousine pulls up in front of your house, escorted by police motorcycles, squad cars, and Secret Service agents. The President and his wife emerge from the limousine, wave to the crowds and news photographers, and walk to your front door.

You open the door wearing dirty jeans and a torn T-shirt and say, "Oh, hi! I've been working out in the garden." As the President steps into the cluttered living room, you say, "Sorry about the mess, but my wife got engrossed in the soap operas on TV this afternoon and didn't get around to cleaning. But dinner's almost ready. She's heating up the leftovers in the microwave right now. Hope you don't mind paper plates."

That's absurd, isn't it? Even if you were poor, if you knew that the President was coming to your house, you would look your best. You would clean your house and maybe even put on some fresh paint. You'd put your best dishes on the table and fix your favorite meal. The President deserves more than leftovers.

So does the Lord. He is "a great King" and His "name is feared among the nations" (1:14). Surely nobody would dare to serve God leftovers, would they?

"Yes," says Malachi, "they would." The priests of his day were doing just that. The people would bring an unblemished lamb to offer as a sacrifice at the temple. The priests would reason, "It doesn't make sense to slaughter this perfectly good lamb. After all, it's just going to be burned on the altar. Let's sell it for a decent price and substitute a slightly blemished lamb that's cheaper. Good stewardship demands it."

Or when the people would bring a less than perfect animal to the temple, the priests would say, "Don't worry about it. It was

sick, so you couldn't risk eating it. It's just going up in smoke anyway. Sacrificing it helps you get rid of an animal that you didn't need and it helps us keep the fires burning on the altar. Everyone wins!" Everyone except God, that is!

Through Malachi, the Lord confronts the priests: "You are despising My name!" But the priests didn't get it. So the Lord explains, "In that you say, 'The table of the Lord is to be despised'" (1:7). (The table refers to the altar of sacrifice [Ezek. 41:22].) The priests were not so brazen as to say those specific words. What they had said was something like I said a moment ago. They knew that the Law of Moses had some "obscure" verses (Lev. 22:20-25; Deut. 15:21) about not offering blemished sacrifices to the Lord.

But they were practical men: "Surely it makes better sense to burn the damaged animals and save the good ones, doesn't it? We're not rich people. The Lord understands our situation, doesn't He? Better to offer blemished animals than none at all, isn't it?" They were trying to make worship more convenient and affordable for the worshipers. But God said, "You are dishonoring Me!"

We live in a day of convenience Christianity. The church is being marketed like a restaurant or store in an attempt to attract more customers. Pastors flock to seminars that share methods on how to attract unchurched people. "Don't preach against sin, because that threatens people. They want to feel good about themselves. They don't bring Bibles to church, so don't get into in-depth Bible study. Give them something positive and uplifting. And, they're used to watching TV. So use a lot of drama and visuals. Keep the sermon short—15 to 20 minutes maximum. Make it entertaining." Pastors who use these techniques testify how their church rapidly grew into thousands of attenders.

Through Malachi, the Lord of hosts has something to say to the modern church: "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not uselessly meet in My name. I am not pleased with you" (paraphrase of 1:10). It would be better to close the doors of the church than to dishonor God when we meet!

At the center of Jewish worship was the offering of sacrifices. The reason people needed to offer sacrifices was that they were

sinner approaching a holy God, and He had ordained sacrifices as the way of approaching Him. To offer blemished sacrifices pulled down the holiness of God by saying, in effect, “God isn’t perfectly holy. We don’t need to offer a perfect substitute for our sins.” And, it lifted up sinners by saying, “We’re not all that bad. A slightly blemished sacrifice is good enough for us to come before God.”

The core message that the church should proclaim is the gospel. The gospel is about sinners who need a Savior in order to be reconciled to a holy God and escape His judgment. If we modify the message to appeal to consumers we are, in effect, offering blemished sacrifices. The modern “gospel” often is pitched as a way to personal fulfillment and happiness: “Jesus will help you succeed in business, have a happy family, and even lose weight! Try Him, you’ll be a satisfied customer!” But what about sin and repentance? What about God’s holiness? What about faith in a Savior who is without sin, who offered Himself in the place of sinners?

God makes it plain that His purpose is to make His name great or revered among the nations (1:11 [twice], 14). As His people, our purpose should be to promote God’s glory among the nations by proclaiming Jesus as God’s perfect sacrifice for sinners. Malachi says,

To promote God’s glory among the nations, we must honor Him by giving Him the best of our lives.

1. God’s purpose is to glorify His name among the nations.

I could preach many sermons on this point alone, but I must be brief here. If we are not clear about what God is doing in this world, then we will not be on target with our lives. In a nutshell, God’s purpose is to promote His glory, and He wants to use His people to do that. To explore this theme, I commend to you the difficult, but rewarding, *God’s Passion for His Glory* [Crossway Books], by John Piper, which contains Jonathan Edwards’ essay, “The End for Which God Created the World.” In another book (*A Hunger for God* [Crossway Books], pp. 179-180), Piper summarizes the biblical argument like this:

God elects his people before the foundation of the world for his glory (Ephesians 1:6). He creates humankind for his glory (Isaiah 43:7). He chooses Israel for his glory (Isaiah 49:3). He

delivers them from Egypt for his glory (Psalm 106:7-8). He restores them after exile for his glory (Isaiah 48:9-11). He sends his Son to confirm his trustworthiness and so the Gentiles will glorify him for his mercy (Romans 15:8-9). He puts his Son to death to display the glory of his vindicated righteousness (Romans 3:25-26). He commands his people to do all things for his glory (1 Corinthians 10:31). He will send his Son a second time to receive the glory due him (2 Thessalonians 1:9-10). And in the end he will fill the earth with the knowledge of his glory (Habakkuk 2:14).

So our aim as God's people should be to glorify God by loving Him above all, by loving one another (the two Great Commandments), and by proclaiming the gospel among the nations (the Great Commission) so that all peoples will glorify His great name.

2. As God's people, we are often blind as to how we dishonor Him.

This message applied to the whole nation, but it was especially aimed at the priests, the spiritual leaders. Those of us who lead the church especially need to ponder these things. When the Lord confronted them through Malachi, they didn't get it: "How have we despised Your name?" (1:6). "How have we defiled You?" (1:7). They looked at all their activities: they were busy offering sacrifices and leading the people in worship. What was the problem?

The problem was that they were not doing what they did with a God-ward focus. They were not offering their sacrifices to please the Lord. They were not focused on magnifying His name. In fact, they were bored with the whole thing (1:13). Their attitude reflected their arrogance and lack of reverence for God. They were going through the motions of worship, but their hearts were not seeking to exalt and glorify God as He deserves.

It's really easy to lead in worship or preach sermons or teach Sunday School or serve the Lord in any capacity with wrong motives. If our hidden motive is to have people think highly of us, our hearts are not right before God. When I preach, if I succumb to the temptation to dodge hard truth so as not to offend anyone, I dishonor God, who inspired His Word. My attitude in all ministry should always be, "Lord, this is an offering to please You and to

magnify Your name!” Any other focus dishonors God, whether I am aware of it or not.

So, God’s purpose is to glorify His name among the nations. As His people, and especially as leaders, we are often blind to how we dishonor Him. Thus the crucial question becomes, “What does it mean to honor the Lord with our lives?”

3. Honoring the Lord means giving Him the best of our lives.

Our text reveals four aspects of this:

A. We should give God the best in terms of cost.

Salvation is a free gift. You cannot earn it or pay for it. You can only accept it freely. But it cost God the life of His beloved Son. Once you accept such a precious gift, it demands everything you have in response. When you recognize that you are not your own, you were bought with a price, and that all that you have has been freely given to you by God, how can you hold back anything from Him?

But these priests in Malachi’s day were giving God the leftovers. They had no use for a blind, lame, or sick animal, so they’d give it to God on the altar (1:8). But God tells them that He would rather that they close the doors of the temple than to have them offer these cheap sacrifices to Him (1:10)!

Giving God what you really don’t need anyway is not giving at all. I’m not suggesting that you should stop giving your extra junk to the church garage sale for missions! But I am saying that if you only give God stuff that you no longer need, you haven’t given at all. If you aren’t pinched because you gave, you didn’t really give. If you only serve when it’s convenient and you don’t have anything better to do, you aren’t really serving. The religious leaders in Jesus’ day threw a lot of money into the temple treasury. But along came a poor widow who put in two small copper coins. Jesus said that she put in more than all of the rest combined. Why? Because they gave out of their surplus, but she gave “all that she had to live on” (Luke 21:3-4).

Your gift reveals your estimate of the one to whom you offer it. Mary of Bethany knew this when she broke her expensive ala-

baster vial of ointment and poured it on the Lord's feet. The indignant, practical-minded disciples murmured, "Why this waste? This perfume could have been sold for a lot of money that could have been given to the poor!" But the Lord commended Mary and rebuked the disciples (John 12:1-8). G. Campbell Morgan observes, "Sacrilege is centered in offering God something which costs nothing, because you think God is worth nothing" (*Wherein Have We Robbed God?* [Revell], p. 50). We only honor God when we give Him our best in terms of cost. With David, we should resolve, "I will not offer burnt offerings to the Lord my God which cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24).

B. We should give God the best in terms of quality.

The Lord only wants unblemished lambs on His altar. If it's a reject, it isn't good enough for the Lord. As He sarcastically asks, "Would you give these blind, sick, and lame sheep to your governor? Would he be pleased with you?" If you wouldn't give such cheap junk to your governor, do you think that you honor the Lord when you give it to Him?

Again, it's better that your junk gets recycled for missions than to clutter up your garage! But there's a misdirected mindset that we need to confront: "If something is worn out or useless to me, I'll give it to the church or to missions." So the Lord's servants limp along with outdated computers and broken-down junk, while the Lord's people fill their homes with the good stuff!

The classic story here (and I think it is true) is that of a missionary who received from some dear old saint a shipment of used clothing and other hand-me-downs. Included in the box was a jar full of used tea bags that the old lady had faithfully dried out and sent for the missionary's use! *Used* tea bags! Why not send a case of new ones? If you hear about a missionary who needs a new computer, don't give him your old, outdated one. Buy him a new one! We don't need to be extravagant, but if it's for the Lord, shouldn't we give the best?

C. We should give God the best in terms of priorities.

God's Word was not top priority for these priests or for the people. They had better ways to use unblemished lambs than to put them on God's altar. God had said that they should honor Him

above all else by their worship. This included obeying His commands for the sacrifices. But God's priority was not their priority. Worshiping God by offering unblemished sacrifices just wasn't all that important to them. By showing contempt for that which God valued, they were showing contempt for God Himself.

Our Lord's command to seek first His kingdom and righteousness (Matt. 6:33) does not apply only to pastors, missionaries, and other "full time" Christian workers. It applies to every follower of Jesus. I wrestle with this constantly, and so should you: Am I valuing with my life what God values? Do my priorities—the way I spend my time, money, and efforts—reflect the things that matter most to God? Am I seeking *first* God's kingdom and righteousness in my personal life, my business, my family, and my spare time activities? Am I seeking to honor God above all else that crowds in for attention?

I'll say from personal experience, the only way to keep your priorities in line is to be consistently in God's Word. It confronts wrong attitudes and values. It gets you back on course when you start to drift. It confronts you when you are valuing things over God Himself. It reminds us that our aim should be to glorify Him.

D. We should give God the best in terms of personal integrity.

Here we're talking about *motive*—why you do what you do. In 1:14, the Lord says, "But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, ..." This guy wants to look good in public, so he makes a grandstand vow to give the best to the Lord. But when it comes time to give, he slips in an inferior animal and keeps the best for himself. He wasn't really offering his sacrifice to the living God, who sees the motives of the heart. He was doing it to be seen by men.

Ananias and Sapphira fell into this trap in the early church. They wanted the church to think that they were giving the total amount from the sale of their land, but they kept back part of it for themselves. As Peter pointed out just before God struck them dead, they were not lying to men, but to God. If we serve the Lord or give to the Lord's work out of the hidden motive of gaining recognition from men, we fail to honor God.

Andrew Fuller, an 18th century pastor and friend of William Carey, was once soliciting funds for foreign missions. A good friend said to him, “Very well, Andrew, seeing it is you, I’ll give \$500.” Fuller responded, “No, I cannot take the money since you give it seeing me.” His friend saw the point and said, “You are right, Andrew. Here is \$1,000, seeing it is for the Lord Jesus.”

So our aim should be to promote God’s glory among the nations. To do that, we must honor Him with the very best of our lives, not with the leftovers. But, as we’ve seen, it’s easy to deceive ourselves and think that we’re honoring God, when actually we’re despising Him.

Conclusion

With that in mind, so that we don’t fool ourselves, I devised a short test based on this passage. There are five questions:

1. Is your service for God less than you would offer a human dignitary?

If you heard that John MacArthur would be sitting in on your Sunday School class, would you prepare any differently? If Chuck Swindoll had been sitting next to you during worship, would you have sung more enthusiastically or dropped more into the offering plate? The point is, Jesus is watching all that you do. He listens to every sermon I preach. We must serve as unto Him.

2. Is God answering your prayers?

In 1:9, Malachi sarcastically tells the people to entreat God’s favor. Then he adds, “With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?” The implied answer is, “No!” If we play games with God by giving Him the leftovers, how can we sincerely ask Him to bless our lives?

3. Are you playing church?

These priests were going through the motions, keeping the fires burning on the temple altar. But God says that it was useless (1:10). He would rather that they close the doors than to go on playing their religious games.

It’s easy to have all sorts of activities and programs in a local church, but to lose sight of the reason why we do these things. It is

not to attract people. Who cares how many people attend your church if they are just giving God the leftovers of worldly lives? God looks on our hearts, not on activities or programs. He is looking for those who worship Him in spirit and in truth.

4. Are you bored with worship and/or Christian service?

These priests were tired of the routine (1:13). Offer another animal, go through the motions one more time, put in your shift at the temple to get your paycheck and go home. They were bored with worship because they had lost sight of the greatness and majesty of God, “the Lord of hosts” (used 7 times in these verses), which means that He commands all the armies of heaven and all of the galaxies in the universe!

If you’re bored with worship or with serving the Lord, you’ve lost sight of the glory and majesty of God. Rituals and routines can be pretty boring, but the living God is definitely *not boring!* Whenever in the Bible someone got a glimpse of God, I assure you, they were not glancing at their watch to find out how much longer the service would last! I realize that not every worship service will give you a glimpse of God! Not every quiet time will be glorious. But if you’re consistently bored with worship, you probably need a fresh glimpse of the greatness of God.

5. Is your passion in life to promote God’s glory among the nations?

You may be thinking, “Hey, I’m not a pastor or missionary! I’m just a layman.” But if God’s aim is that His name will be great among the nations, and you are His blood-bought servant, shouldn’t His aim be your aim? Shouldn’t pleasing Him be your daily desire (see 1:8, 9, 10)? Shouldn’t His kingdom and glory be your passion?

Comedian Rodney Dangerfield is famous for his line, “I don’t get no respect.” But he stole that line from the Lord! God says to His people, “If I am a father, where is My honor? If I am a master, where is My respect?” Don’t give God the leftovers. Give Him the best you’ve got! His name will be great among the nations. Make sure that He is great in your daily life!

Discussion Questions

1. How does a businessman or housewife apply the command to seek first God's kingdom? What are the daily implications?
2. How can a believer know how much to give to the Lord's work? Is 10% the New Testament standard? Why/why not?
3. Does giving God the best imply building ornate cathedrals? Why/why not? What does it imply in practical terms?
4. How can a bored Christian recapture a sense of God's majesty?

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