



## **MALACHI – KEEPING FAITHFUL**

Text: Malachi 2:10-16

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What do weddings, politicians and God have in common? They all make promises. What is the problem you see with each of these pictures? Here are some confessions of politicians. Eduard Shevardnadze (former Foreign Affairs Ministers for the Soviet Union) said 'You know, to address crowds and make promises does not require much brains.' Peter Garrett, a past minister in the Australian Labor Government said 'What generally happens in this country is that our politicians don't serve us well because they don't tell the truth and they don't keep their promises.' On the other hand Lewis Smedes, a Reformed theologian said 'Some people still make promises and keep those they make. When they do they help make life around them stably human'. And he also wrote 'Promise keeping is a powerful means of grace in a time when people hardly depend on each other to remember and live by their word.' The world is full of deceitful and untrustworthy people. It does not need us to add to it. Rather when we are faithful there is a hope. It is like a beacon of light to a darkened world. It is so important because faithfulness is the fibre that holds the world together.

It is this issue of "*...breaking faith with one another*" as Malachi puts it in 2:10 that is the big concern here in our text. Last week we saw that Malachi was critical of the priests who had failed in their responsibilities and had "*...caused many to stumble.*" (2:8) When the Word of God is not clearly taught and God's standards are not lived out we lose the ability to discern what is right. And we lose the biblical conviction to do it. Our text shows three key areas where the people of Malachi's time were stumbling. Or we can say three results of one key issue: lack of faithfulness to each other and to God. In verse 10 Malachi speaks of the general area of personal relationships. In verses 11-12

he touches on the area of marriage to unbelievers. And in verse 13-16 Malachi deals with the issue of divorce.

Look with me at verse 10 where Malachi deals with the main issue: "*Have 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?*" The key concept here is: '*breaking faith*'. The same Hebrew word is used five times in each of the three areas. It is the word '*bagad*' which means 'to cover or cloak things over and so act falsely, to break faith'. It's like shaking hands on a deal while we have our fingers crossed behind our back. So the issue that runs through each of these areas is this failure to keep a commitment. Everything seems good, but there is a 'covering over' what is really going on. Now by using this same word all the way through our text Malachi is showing life hangs on us honouring our commitments. Or 'keeping covenant' as the Old Testament would put it. That's what God does. He always keeps his covenant promises. When trust and commitment are maintained you have 'covenantal order'. There is 'shalom', a peaceful harmony where things are as they should be. It is all good between husband and wife, parents and children. There is harmony between members in the church, employers and employees. The peace and prosperity of a community is held together by faithfulness. It is the very fabric of a community. If we stress our individuality, and just do whatever we want regardless of our commitments, that starts to unravel everything else. Some might call it personal freedom, not being tied down. But the effects are enormous.

In verse 10 Malachi gives reasons why, as God's people, we should not be faithless to one another. He says we have "*one father...has not one God created us?*" In other words, we are together one family. If we betray a trust we betray our own family. Which, in reality, is the family of God. So in failing to honour our promises we dishonour God. Why is that the case? Why does being faithful matter? Because of who God is. We have made it clear we must always appreciate the worth of God. Faithfulness is key to his character. The great claim of the Bible is that God is absolutely faithful in character. He is unchanging in his power, in his love, in his holiness, in his grace. He is totally committed to his gospel purposes. It is on God's utter reliability, that the hope of the entire world rests. All the promises he has made in history and recorded in the Bible God is totally committed to. Because God is faithful there will ultimately be true peace through Jesus. Now, when we as part of God's family 'break faith', we imply that God also can break his commitments. Don't children have the tendencies of their parents? In

that sense we are "*profaning the covenant of our fathers*". Malachi is referring here to God's covenant with Abraham. God committed to bless Abraham and through him all the nations. That came about through Jesus and is ongoing even now. Malachi is saying when we break faith we 'profane' or disrespect that covenant.

Moving from that general principle Malachi moves to the area of marriage. Look at verse 11 "*Judah has broken faith. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary God loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god.*" In verse 16 it says "*I hate divorce*" says the God of Israel". In verse 13 we learn that God refuses to accept the offerings of the people. In verse 14 they ask "*Why?*" And the answer is given: "*It is because the Lord is acting as a 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.*" Let me explain the situation here so you grasp why God is so disturbed with them. In the Law Moses had pointed out that marriage was to be for life. However as Jesus pointed out ( Matthew 19:8) "*Moses permitted you to divorce your wives because your hearts were hard. But it was not this way from the beginning*". Now it got to the point where a Hebrew man would divorce his wife for almost any reason. For example, if the wife displeased him by burning the dinner once too often. Or she spoke too loud and embarrassed him in front of his neighbours. Or he was tired of her and she didn't look as pretty in her older age. Now understand the sexism here. It was only the man who could divorce his wife, not the other way round. The woman could only leave, but not divorce. It was a man's world. If she was divorced the woman lost her support and place.

Now in this context we see how badly the men were 'breaking faith'. Malachi speaks of the '*wife of your youth*'. To get a feel for the situation let me quote from one commentary. 'She whom you wrong with the sin of divorce is the same woman, who in the bloom of her beauty, left her father's house and shared in your early struggles and rejoiced in your later successes. She is the woman who walked arm in arm with you along the pilgrimage of life, cheering you in its trials by her gentle ministry. And now, when the bloom of her youth has faded and the friends of her youth have gone, when father and mother whom she left for you are in the grave, then you cruelly cast her off as a worn out worthless thing, and insult her by putting some pretty young heathen in her place'. You get the picture. It was shocking. The men at the time treated their wives like some old piece of furniture to be thrown out. They abandoned and divorced their

wives to marry the beautiful young things who were actually worshipping other gods. That's what is meant by saying *'Judah... married the daughter of a foreign god'*.

Now saying that it was not implying you can't marry someone from another race. Think of Boaz marrying Ruth the Moabite. She was the great grandmother of David who was the ancestor of Jesus. Nor is it saying certain people are not good enough. Irrespective of race or religion we are all sinners. The issue is that the young woman who the Israelite man was marrying clearly had no interest in serving the God of Israel. She worshipped another deity. God saw that as *"...desecrating his sanctuary"*. Why is God so strong on this point? Well think of what we just said about God's covenant with Abraham. That's how the world would be blessed. And we see in verse 16 God is referred to as *"...the Lord God of Israel"*. That name is significant. Israel was called to be separate from other nations. They were God's 'treasured possession' a 'kingdom of priests and a holy nation'. It would be from Israel that the Christ would come. So the hope of the whole creation depended on Israel being faithful. Notice in verse 15 we see God is against the men divorcing to marry these younger women *"...Because he was seeking godly offspring"*. How does that tie in? When a man and woman of different religious backgrounds get married, one or both of them compromise on the matter of faith in order for them to live happily together. If we compromise on bringing up our children in the faith what happens? Usually the less demanding standard prevails. An unbelieving dad by not going to church implies to his kids it's not important. So they eventually tell mum they would rather stay home. Remember what happened with Solomon. He ended up compromising on his faith by joining his wives in the worship of their gods. Solomon's legacy is he tore apart Israel and set it on its downward trajectory. Again God is so strong here because he cares for his people. Remember what he said at the beginning *"I have loved you"*. If there were no *'godly offspring'* Israel would cease to be the people of God. If that happened where would Jesus fit in? If Jesus did not come and bring forgiveness through his death and resurrection, where would be the hope for the world? We should see the issue of Christians marrying someone who does not accept Jesus as not simply personal matter. We need to see the bigger picture that God now brings hope through the church as he did through Israel in the past. We need to ensure the next generation will carry on the faith. As someone once put it 'the church is one generation away from being extinct'. Then who will bring hope to our communities?

Now as we said God was so strong against the use of divorce by the Israelite men, because they were so callously casting aside their wives. The language of God is so strong because he is so passionate about marriage. God sees it as a 'covenant'. It is not just about feeling romantic. And if that's not there it's finished. Marriage is a covenant. It's a promise of faithfulness. Marriage is built on that commitment. It is the commitment to each other that keeps things going through the dry periods. We see how God says he is "*the witness*". He holds us accountable for the vows we make on our wedding day. But marriage is not only faithfulness to each other. It is also faithfulness to God. Our marriages are a reflection of God's relationship with his people. The imagery of Israel as God's 'wife' can be seen throughout the Old Testament. Isaiah 54:4 says "*Your maker is your husband, the Lord of hosts is his name; and the Holy one of Israel is your redeemer.*" So the basic reason why God speaks against divorce is that it is fundamentally a contradiction of his covenant with his wife, the people of Israel. God will never nullify his marriage to his elect. Jesus will never forsake his bride, the church. When God says "*I have loved you*" he means it and holds to that from eternity to eternity. When Paul writes in Ephesians 5 about husbands and wives the discussion about Jesus and the church is so intertwined you are not sure which he is talking about. That's because the one is the picture of the other. Thinking again of the "*godly offspring*" our children learn so much about the relationship of Jesus and the church by observing their parents. Parents who faithfully love and serve each other show something of how Jesus served us and how we now want to live for him. Do you realise our homes are bases for the gospel to be shared. Together our various families form the church family. And as Israel was a "*light to the nations*" in the Old Testament times, the church is now to be the light to the world. The decisions about who we marry, how we live in our marriages, how we relate to our children are deeply personal issues. But they are also hugely kingdom issues. They part of how God brings hope to our communities.

Now the reality is that none of us is perfect in keeping all our commitments. Not even in our marriages. It is not only politicians who break promises. Hopefully we have not experienced the sheer callousness of those Israelites. Whatever our own circumstances it is so important to understand what God says here and why he says it. He says these things because he loves us. We note God was not so receptive to the Israelites. Malachi noted "*You weep and wail because God no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them as pleasure from your hands.*" That's because they were such callous

hypocrites. But let's not be like them. Let's honestly acknowledge our lack of faithfulness, whatever form that takes. Let's come to God determined to seek his mercy. Let's be determined to be faithful to him. Then God will be await our coming with open arms and his amazing grace. He has promised us that through faith in Jesus. God will not and cannot do otherwise, because it is his very character. As he said to Moses: *"The Lord, the Lord, the compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger and abounding in love and faithfulness, maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness, rebellion and sin."* (Exodus 34:6&7). That's why we live in hope even when politicians and others break their promises.

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION

*These questions can be followed up personally, with a Christian friend, in your small groups, or in discussion after the service. Reflection is important because too often we hear a good sermon and soon forget it without actually growing spiritually or changing in attitude or what we do. The reflection questions are meant to be challenging, because our spiritual growth and the salvation of others is so important.*

- What in this sermon challenged/rebuked/encouraged you the most? Why?
- Why does 'breaking faith' affect our view of God?
- Explain how the actions of the Israelites so callous and hypocritical?
- Why does God *"seek Godly offspring"*? How is it affected by who we marry or if we divorce?