



TURNING THE HEARTS OF THE FATHERS

Text: Malachi 4:4-6

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It was some months ago that our church office was broken into. Maybe you have had your home broken into and know what it's like. The worst thing about it is not just the things taken. Much of that is covered by insurance. It's the sense of having been violated. Your sense of security is broken. Your home is no longer your castle, where you feel safe. You end up worrying about your ability to protect your family. But then again, even if there are no burglars there are still intruders who can play havoc with your children. They come through the TV and normalize values you don't hold to. They can come in through the internet. We worry about our children. Will they grow up and love the Lord? It can be hard with all the wrong messages they can get via the electronic media. We obviously want to protect their hearts and minds. Now Malachi in our text is concerned about the 'hearts of the children'. And he makes the point that the greatest potential to wrongly affect the children's hearts are not the intruders from outside. It's those inside the home. Namely, their own parents. That children become disciples of Jesus is God's doing, by his Spirit. And he does that saving work through his people. The biggest influence on the children are parents. And the largest part of that influence is the example parents set. A psychologist has noted 'Parents vastly underestimate how closely they are observed and how constantly they are evaluated by their child.' Another wrote 'You may think your young people could care less about what you have to say. But current research suggests that parents have a lot more influence than they realize. Not only are they listening, but more importantly, they are watching you closely and modeling their lives after you. Whether you believe it or not, parents are the biggest influence in their teens' life.' Now here's an interesting thing to note. 'Swiss researchers discovered that if Dad faithfully attends church, even though Mom doesn't, kids are still 44 percent more likely to keep going to church as adults. But if Mom goes regularly and Dad never shows up, only 2 percent of the kids continue to

attend. That's a very big gap, and a telling sign of why the father's influence is so significant.'

Let's note what Malachi says (4:6) "*He (the prophet Elijah) will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers...*" This text in Malachi addresses the far-reaching implications of the actions of parents. We know sin has an effect on everything. In this case the relationship between fathers and children is in serious need of restoration. If you have been following our series through Malachi, it doesn't take rocket science to see that the lifestyle of Israel would lead to a breakdown in the relationship between parents and children. And then, in that breakdown, the parents would be leading their own children astray in their faith. We have seen that in Malachi's day the people were nominal in their faith. They were at worship because it was the cultural thing to do. But they had no real love for God. Despite the outward show of religion, they were bored with worship. They had decided that serving God wasn't worth it. They had come to that conclusion because it seemed the 'arrogant' and 'evil doers' were healthy and wealthy and weren't dealt with by God. The people brought diseased animals for the sacrifice, and the priests didn't care because they were bored with their calling. The men divorced their wives of long standing for foreign young women who worshipped other gods. Their lack of faith led to lack of giving for the work of God. As God had complained 'you are robbing me'. The people muttered amongst themselves that God wasn't worth serving and had said 'harsh things about' God. The faith of the people was slowly disintegrating which led to a break down in other areas.

You can well understand that all that also led to the break down in the relationship between children and their fathers. Parents who behave in the way I have just described, have a double impact on their children. Because the parents behaviour was so cynical and self centered they implied their children were not important to them. When their marriages broke up you can imagine the effect on their children. Their nominal faith, with no heart for God, pushed the children away from any real relationship with God. The children saw a slack attitude towards God and simply took it to its logical conclusion. In our day, some one once said: 'If parents turn up at church once in 2-3 weeks, the children will come to church once in 4-6 weeks. The next generation will slip even further away'. We see that Malachi says that the '*hearts of the fathers will be turned to the children*'. That implies prior to this they have been turned away from the

children. Fathers' hearts can be turned away from their children because they are preoccupied with self-interest or work. The result is the children just get the dregs of their life. Parents can show their hearts away turned away from the children by being abusive, by constantly criticizing, breaking their spirit. Or parents can become bitter and turn away because their children failed to meet their expectations for them. Malachi says the hearts of the children also needed to be turned to the fathers. How have they turned away? By rebelling. By walking away from the values of the family. Or just extending the failures of the parents to its natural conclusion.' As a child might say to their parent today 'Why complain if I don't go to church? Your church going is only a load of hypocrisy!'

Now this is describing how things had got to in Malachi's time. And, again, I suggest often it's not far off the mark in our days. But what Malachi says here in verse 6 is 'take heart'. That's how it was back then because of the unfaithfulness of God's people. God had made it very clear that judgment was coming. Not just the refining fire, but the complete destruction of the (4:10) "*...arrogant and evil doer... not a root or branch will be left to them.*" But these last verses in the Old Testament give hope! God will turn the "*...hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers.*" How will that come about? Well look at verse 4: "*Remember the law of my servant Moses, the decrees and laws I gave him at Horeb for all Israel.*" Malachi is saying 'Remember your beginnings. Remember what happened at Mount Sinai. Remember how God saved you from Egypt in that astonishing way. Remember how he made a covenant with you'. It was an act of sheer grace because, as God said, (Deuteronomy 7:7) "*You were the least of all the peoples on the earth*". So, Malachi is saying 'Be people of the book again. Read God's laws and decrees. Remember how he wanted you to live in response to his saving grace. Look how far removed you are from what God originally commanded. Realize the difference and return to God!' What Malachi says is so reassuring. It implies the God's covenant still stands. Despite their constant failure, God does not change. He remains faithful to his covenant promises. He will never abandon his people. As he said (Malachi 3:6 &7) "*I the Lord do not change. So you, O descendants of Jacob are not destroyed...Return to me and I will return to you*". The key way for us as parents to bring up our children to be disciples of Jesus is to be people of the book. We need to soak ourselves in the gospel and remember what God has done for us in Jesus. We need to let that inspire how we live with each other. The more we actually do as Jesus said the more harmonious our families will be. Virtually all our

relational problems stem in some way from not living as God says in his Word. If we were to truly *"Love God with all our heart, and all our soul and all our mind, and our neighbour as ourselves"* just imagine the affect that would have our lives and on our children. *"Remember the law of my servant Moses..."* In our times, we would say 'Remember what Jesus has done.' It may be that the first thing we need to do is get back into our Bible for ourselves and let it affect how we think and live.

Now, Malachi not only calls on the people to look back and remember God's covenant at Mt Sinai. He also calls them to look forward. In sense, these verses are a bridge between the Old Testament and the New Testament. There is a reaching back and a reaching forward. Note verse 5: *"See I will send you the prophet Elijah..."* Malachi is saying, 'Here is the answer. Here is the remedy'. The New Testament makes it clear that John the Baptist represented Elijah's return. And you remember John's message? John preached a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. John did that to prepare the people for the coming of Jesus. John saw Jesus as the one bringing the Day of Judgment. And Jesus did that. Through his suffering on the cross, through his death and resurrection Jesus became the decider of the fate of every human being. In Jesus, the Day of Judgment is brought forward. The Day of the Lord breaks into history. Jesus said in John 3:18 *"Whoever believes in me is not condemned. Whoever does not believe stands condemned already."* Whoever remembers the 'law of Moses' and realizes just how far they fall short of what God requires, will see how desperately they need a savior. That person will come, hungry for grace and find it in Jesus. At that moment of faith, destiny is sealed. As Jesus said in John 5 you *"Very truly I tell you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life and will not be judged but has crossed over from death to life."*

But if people don't see their need for Jesus, they stand condemned. Note the last words of Malachi, the very last words of the Old Testament: (4:6b) *"...or else I will come and strike the land with a curse."* These last words would have been truly staggering for the people of Israel. Being God's covenant people was always associated with the Promised Land. The land was holy. It was where God dwelt. You could not be in relationship with God and not have that land. Now God is saying, unless you listen to Elijah, to John the Baptist, to the One he points to and repent, I will curse this land. In other words, I am finished with you. Just over 400 years later, after Jesus, the Romans destroyed the temple and Jerusalem and scattered the Jews. It is only in the last 70

years they have returned with the new nation of Israel. These last words are very strong. But they are gracious in that they highlight just how important it is to heed God's warning. God is saying I am doing this one thing, that is, sending Elijah to prepare for the Saviour, so that I won't do the other thing, which is to '*curse the land*'. Listen to me and return to me! It is striking that the Old Testament ends with a curse. The New Testament ends with (Revelation 22:20) "*Come Lord Jesus*". God's grace will triumph.

Malachi began with God saying (Malachi 1:2) "*I have loved you*". It's a love so vast it began before time and will never end. It is so deep God gave his own Son to suffer in our place. God's challenge his people to change is not about being judgmental. It's about grace. It is for every person to realize how far they have moved from God and see the need to come back to God. When a person does, God is ready to receive them. "*Return to me and I will return to you.*" In fact, we see in the New Testament that God himself comes to dwell in us by his Spirit. The temple is destroyed but now God's people are themselves the Holy of Holies of the Almighty. When we truly grasp the wonder of that we can't remain with a nominal faith, where going to church is just a cultural thing. A deep love for God changes everything else. Worship becomes a joy. Giving for the kingdom becomes an expression of devotion to God. We are willing to make real sacrifices for the sake of the gospel. Church leaders will no longer be bored but inspired to lead by example. If we have really comprehended what our sin is like, if we have experienced the amazing love of God, if we see Jesus suffering hell for us, can we still be cynical about God and be bored in our worship? Can we not be devoted to our family and church? Now you understand what Malachi says: "*He will turn the hearts of the fathers to the children and the hearts of the children to the fathers*". Where there is deep devotion for God there is true love for one another. It is seen in how devoted fathers are to their children. It is seen in children loving their parents, following the examples of faith they see daily. Do we want to protect the hearts of our children? Do we want them to have faith in Jesus? Do we want them to be there with God's people when Jesus returns for the final Judgment? Then let us stamp out the last vestiges of a cultural religion, people seldom in worship and bored if they are. Where it is needed let us as parents and adults repent of our own cynicism and wrong priorities and be deeply devoted to God. Let our children see adults who display humility and repentance, grace and forgiveness. Let the children sit with us and read the Bible together often, being people of the book. And let us pray for one another and our children all the time. Pray that on the last day we are like those calves jumping for joy, frolicking in sheer delight

that Jesus has come. Then the sun of righteousness with healing in its wings will have risen and all will be renewed and sin and death will be gone.

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 can have the greatest impact on your children's faith? What is your Christian life like- turning hearts towards or away from God?
- Why is it important to remember "the law of my servant Moses"? How can you do that with you children?
- What might you need to do to increase your love for God and ensure your faith is not just cultural, but growing to become more like Jesus?