

Faithfulness Matters

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Preacher: Andrew Price

[0 : 0 0] As we continue our series through the book of Malachi, I can add my words of welcome to you this morning and we have visitors amongst us. My name is Andrew. I'm also one of the pastors here.

Well, being faithful and keeping your word in life used to be a normal expectation for all people. You gave your word, maybe you shook on it and that was that.

But these days, the amount that faithfulness matters seems to depend on who you are. So take the stereotypical used car salesperson. Faithfulness doesn't seem to matter all that much to some of them, not all of them, but some of them.

For when I bought a secondhand car, the man promised that it was in good working order and guess what? A few months later, it wasn't. In fact, when I took it to the mechanic, he put it up on a hoist and as he raised the car up, the front left wheel dropped. Literally.

The mechanic said, well, there's your problem. Yeah. So this man who sold me the car just reinforced the stereotypical type that faithfulness doesn't matter too much if you are a used car salesperson.

[1 : 1 9] And when it comes to police or ambulance officers, it seems faithfulness matters more. So when I came off my bike some time ago and was taken to hospital, the ambulance officers told me exactly what they were going to do.

And then they did exactly what they said. Because of who they were, faithfulness mattered more, you see. Well, as we come to Malachi chapter two today, God reminds the people that faithfulness matters because of who they are.

You see, they are God's people. He has created them and called them. And so they are to be faithful to each other. Point one in your outline, verse 10 in your Bible.

He says, do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?

You see, the Jews were being unfaithful to each other. Malachi will give two specific examples of unfaithfulness in a moment. But here it seems to be unfaithfulness in general, whether it's breaking their word to each other socially or perhaps cheating each other in business and so on.

[2 : 3 4] Now, it's actually easy to imagine this happening. Remember, they've returned from the exile. Life is hard. But it feels like God has lost that loving feeling, as we saw a couple of weeks ago.

So it was just easier to cut corners and to cheat one another to get ahead rather than to trust God to provide. Indeed, the prophet Zechariah, who came just before Malachi in history and in your Bibles, said this on the next slide.

He said this to the people, These are the things you are to do. Speak the truth to each other and render true and sound judgment in your courts. Do not plot evil against your neighbor and do not love to swear falsely.

I hate all this, declares the Lord. You see, such unfaithfulness to each other existed amongst the people in Zechariah's day.

And it seems to have continued in Malachi's day. But faithfulness matters because of who they are. You see, verse 10 began with who God is and what God has done.

[3 : 43] And in the Bible, it always starts with who God is and what he has done for us before we learn how to respond to that. And in verse 10, what is it that God has done? Well, he has created them and fathered them as a nation.

We heard in chapter one that God loved them and chose to adopt them as his people, his firstborn sons, as it were. He became their father. Chapter one, verse six.

Then God increased their numbers and they ended up in Egypt. You might remember, then God saved them from Egypt and he brought them to himself at Mount Sinai. And there he made them into a nation.

He made a covenant with them, which is a contract or agreement. And in this agreement, God promised to be their God, to bless them and to watch over them. And they promised to be his people, to trust him and to obey his commandments.

And in so doing, they were to become a holy nation and to reflect their father's likeness to the nations around them. Malachi's point here is that the people in his day have one and the same father as their ancestors did back in Moses day.

[4 : 54] They have one and the same God as their ancestors did. And so what applied to their ancestors still applies to them. Like their ancestors, they were still God's covenant people.

Who were to keep their promises, which included being faithful to one another. And so to reflect God's own faithfulness to the nations around them.

We're all familiar. Are we not with the phrase like father, like son? On the next slide is a photo of a father and son who share a similar look, which I thought was rather funny.

And on the next slide is a famous person, Tom Hanks and his son. They look quite alike as well. Of course, what Israel was to reflect was not their father's looks, but their father's character.

Faithfulness mattered because of who they still were.

[5 : 58] God's covenant people. And so they were to walk in God's ways and reflect God's character to the world. But faithfulness also mattered because being unfaithful to each other meant breaking that covenant.

And so being unfaithful to God himself. In other words, to sin against each other was also to sin against God. You see, faithfulness to each other really does matter.

Well, after this general example of unfaithfulness to each other, Malachi moves to a specific example of how they've been unfaithful to God. Point to verse 11.

Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves by marrying women who worship a foreign God.

As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the Lord remove him from the tents of Jacob, even though he brings an offering to the Lord Almighty.

[7 : 00] Here it seems that the whole nation is guilty of unfaithfulness to God. How? Well, it says by desecrating the sanctuary the Lord loves.

That's the abomination. Now, usually the sanctuary refers to the temple. But the word sanctuary is literally the holy place or the holy one. And the holy one whom he loves, well, that was his people.

His people who were supposed to be a holy nation. To be holy means two things. One, to be morally pure, which is how we often think of it. But secondly, holy means to be set apart, to be different, distinct.

Israel was supposed to be set apart from the nations around them, the nations who worshipped all sorts of gods. But Israel was to be different and worship only one God.

But here in Malachi, the people have married women who worship other gods and so have brought these other gods into their homes, into their nation. And in so doing, they have made their holy nation that was supposed to be different and worship only one God.

[8 : 08] Well, they've made it unholy. They have desecrated their nation, the sanctuary that God loves. I mean, a kind of silly example. Imagine an Essendon supporter bringing a Collingwood flag into the Essendon club and putting up next door to the next to the bomber's flag.

Now, I mentioned this this morning and there was an ardent bomber's supporter and he said, no, sacrilege. Actually, for God, this would have been more like putting a Nazi flag up in a Jewish synagogue.

Unthinkable. But that's what the Jews had done. They married these women who worshipped other gods. And even if the Jews weren't worshipping their wives' gods, they were still bringing them into their homes, into their nation.

Now, again, we can understand why they might have done this. When they returned from exile, they didn't have much. All the business and the trade were run by foreigners living in their country.

And so what better way to get into the foreigner's family business than by getting into the foreigner's family? But by doing so, they left their own family business of being holy as their father is holy.

[9 : 26] And this was a widespread issue, so much so that Ezra and Nehemiah both had to deal with it, who came after Malachi. And so this is what Nehemiah says on the next slide.

It runs over a few slides. That meant they couldn't read the Old Testament.

They're scriptures. And so I rebuked them and called curses down on them. I beat some of the men and pulled out their hair. I made them take an oath in God's name and said, You are not to give your daughters in marriage to their sons, nor are you to take their daughters in marriage for your sons or for yourselves.

Was it not because of marriages like these that Solomon, king of Israel, sinned? Among the many nations, there was no king like him. He was loved by his God and God made him king over all Israel.

But even he was led into sin by foreign women. Must we hear now that you too are doing all this terrible wickedness and are being unfaithful to our God by marrying foreign women?

[10 : 38] Now, to be clear, the issue is not women. The issue is not even foreign women. The issue is bringing foreign gods into your home when you are supposed to worship God and him alone.

I mean, Boaz was an Israelite and he married Ruth, who was a Moabite. Did he not? Now, the real issue is marrying people who worship other gods because they bring gods into your home over time and lead you away from the true God.

And by doing so, they desecrated their nation, which was supposed to be holy, and put their whole nation at risk of exile again.

And that's how serious it is. That's why Ezra and Nehemiah react the way they do. That's why it's called detestable in verse 11. And that's why God reacts the way he does in verse 12.

You see, faithfulness to God alone really does matter. Well, the second specific example of unfaithfulness also has to do with marriage. But this time, it's about staying married and not being unfaithful by divorce.

[11 : 43] So, point three, verse 13. Another thing you do, you flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands.

And you ask, why? Well, it is because the Lord is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant.

Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So, be on your guard and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth.

Here, the Israelites are weeping and wailing and flooding the altar with tears. And that threefold description here is meant to suggest excessive emotion.

The kind of carry-on shown by people who worshipped other gods. It reminds us of the prophets of Baal, do you remember? Who would dance around the fire when they were having a barbecue off with Elijah.

[12 : 51] And they danced around the fire. They cut themselves and wailed and moaned in an effort to try and twist Baal's arm. So that Baal might answer their prayers.

So it seems that some of the foreign religious practice they brought into their homes were already starting to rub off on them. But again, it's easy to imagine if life was tough and God wasn't answering your prayers the way you wanted, then maybe you were praying the wrong way.

Maybe we were sacrificing the wrong way. Maybe we should try and look to these other nations and practice the same kind of excessive emotion they did. But in verse 14, when they finally ask why, God answers, it is because they are being unfaithful to the wife of their youth.

That is their first wife. You see, it seems that they were divorcing their first wife in order to marry a foreign wife so that they could get ahead in business and trade. But such unfaithfulness to their spouse is a problem for three reasons.

First, in verse 15, God has made them one. Verse 15 is very hard to translate from the Hebrew. I think a better translation is on the next slide. It's from the NIV, the previous version.

[14 : 04] And it says, Has not he made them one? In flesh and spirit they are his. And why one? Because he was seeking godly offspring.

You see, it's really just picking up Genesis chapter 2, where we're told a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife, and the two will become, what was it?

One. Flesh. That's right. It's what we heard in our second reading, where Jesus adds, What God has joined together, let no one separate. You see, this is how God designed marriage to be.

And so faithfulness to your spouse matters because of who you are in marriage. You are one in God's sight. That's the first reason that marital faithfulness matters.

The second reason is because, verse 15, God desires godly children. I mean, God knows how hard it is to be a parent. And a Christian parent at that, who seeks to raise their children in the Lord.

[15 : 03] And having two parents who are both believers makes it much easier to raise children in the Lord than having just one parent, or having just one parent who believes.

That's why we as a church need to do everything we can to support single parents, or parents whose spouse does not believe, to help them raise their children in the Lord, because it's hard work.

But this is the second reason that faithfulness matters, because it helps to raise children as Christians. It doesn't guarantee it, but it helps. The third reason that faithfulness to your spouse matters, though, is because the alternative of divorce, well, it's like hating your spouse, and committing an act of violence.

Do you see verse 16? The man who hates and divorces his wife, says the Lord, the God of Israel, does violence to the one he should protect, says the Lord Almighty.

You see, faithfulness to your spouse matters, because divorce is like hating and committing an act of violence. Of course, there are some reasons why you might have to divorce.

[16:10] We heard one of those reasons from our second reading, the New Testament. In fact, even God divorces Israel at one point. But divorce is a tragedy, and it affects not only the couple, but the children, the wider family, and if they're part of the church, the wider church family.

It's not how God designed married people to live. And so faithfulness matters. Not just because God made married couples to be one, not just because it helps produce godly offspring, but also because it avoids divorce, which effectively does violence to those involved.

You see, faithfulness matters. And hopefully, you can see that that's the big idea of the passage. You see, while the topic of marriage comes up with Malachi's examples, the theme that actually runs throughout the passage is not being unfaithful.

I mean, the word unfaithful comes up in verse 10, verse 11, verse 14, verse 15, and verse 16. And that's how Malachi ends in verse 16.

He says, so guard yourselves and do not be unfaithful. And so that's the big idea, that that's the main application for us. You see, God has saved us through the Lord Jesus.

[17:27] And Jesus died to forgive us our sins so that we could be brought into God's family, so that we could be adopted as his children and made into a holy nation.

And we, as his holy and loved children, are to reflect his character to those around us, including his faithfulness. Indeed, God even gives us his spirit to help us in this.

So let me show you a couple of verses from the New Testament. Ephesians 5, one says, be imitators of God. Reflect his likeness as dearly loved children.

Or Colossians 3, Paul writes, as God's chosen people, holy and dearly loved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience.

In other words, the characteristics of God. Now, faithfulness is not there, but it gets picked up in Galatians 5. But the fruit of the spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, and faithfulness.

[18:27] You see, faithfulness matters because of who we are in Christ. We are God's holy and dearly loved children. And so we are to reflect God's character with the help of God's spirit.

And that means being faithful in those three examples. Firstly, being faithful to one another. I had a go at my, one of my children the other day because, well, they said they were going to clean up their room and they didn't.

And to which they replied, I had my fingers crossed when I said it. Apparently that releases you from being faithful, but not in our house as they found out.

We are not to be people who cross our fingers so we can break our word. No, we are to keep our word. When you say to someone, we should catch up sometime, then you should catch up sometime.

Or don't say it. If we say we'll turn up somewhere, then turn up or apologize. If something stops you. When we turn up, we are to turn up at the time we said we're going to turn up.

[19 : 33] We're to be faithful to one another, to keep our word to one another, to be known as people of integrity. And can I say I've been encouraged by people here at HTD because people have said that they found the church friendly, this service actually, friendly.

People are nice and sincere. In other words, they have integrity. They're genuine. They reflect God's character, which is great. And so keep going.

Keep being faithful as your heavenly father is faithful. But not just be faithful to one another, but also be faithful to God, ensuring that God alone is God of your lives.

And as far as it depends on us, the only God in our homes as well. In Malachi's day, it meant not marrying people who worshipped other gods. And there is still truth in this for us today.

Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 7 that if someone is free to marry, they're free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord. My wife, Michelle, already prays that if our children are to marry, that God will provide a Christian for them to marry.

[20 : 47] Why not pray that for your own grandchildren, nieces, nephews? Of course, sometimes we become Christians after we're married, or our spouse moves away from God while we're married, or we just weren't mature Christians at the time when we got married.

Well, that's okay. God forgives. But now, be faithful to your spouse. Be godly in front of your spouse. For who knows, God may use you to lead them to Christ, as Peter says.

But I think what is happening here can actually be applied to anything we accept in our homes, which might be another God or another idol. For we are meant to be holy, set apart for God alone.

So if we have any idols or other gods in our homes, we're to get rid of them. Or change. For example, if I'm honest, sometimes I wonder if TV is God of our house, because that's what our children fight over.

That's what they can't wait to watch and listen to, compared to reading the Bible at family time. And it seems to be more of a priority to them than God is. But faithfulness to God matters most.

[22 : 01] A guy in my Bible study group last Thursday is looking for work, and he's applying for many jobs. He's had one interview so far, but was knocked back. So he's using his time to apply for jobs and help his wife out around the house.

But he confessed that because of this, that he's not reading his Bible as much as he used to. He's out of routine. And so his prayer point was that his Bible reading would get back on track, because that was actually more important than getting a job.

I wonder if that's how much faithfulness matters to us. Extraordinary thing to say. The bottom line is, as far as it depends on you, as much control as you have, then God is to be the only God in your house.

For through Christ, we are holy, set apart for God alone. So faithfulness to God matters. And finally, for us who are married, as far as it depends on us, we are also to be faithful to our spouse, for God has made us one.

In fact, as Christians, our unity as married couples is meant to represent the unity between Christ and the church. So we are to maintain the unity, be faithful, because the alternative of divorce is like hating and committing violence against our spouse.

[23 : 15] Having said that, God understands we live in a fallen world where people are sinful, including ourselves. And so sometimes, he permits divorce as a lesser of two evils. And we don't have time to unpack all of that now.

But the point in Malachi is that God has designed marriage till death do us part. And so faithfulness matters. Which is why I'm so encouraged to hear people who celebrate 20, 30, 40, 50 year anniversaries.

We're coming up to our 18th year. We had a couple this morning coming up to their 61st year. Amazing. What a great testimony of faithfulness to their spouse.

Well, let me finish with a story of Ida Lewis. Ida Lewis was America's most famous lighthouse keeper in Newport, Rhode Island. From 1857 to 1911, she tended to the light, which in those days was an oil lamp.

I think there's a picture of her on the next slide. And so for 54 years, she would take care of the light, which meant filling the lamp with oil at sundown and again at midnight, trimming the wick, polishing the carbon off the reflectors so the light could shine out bright, and then getting up in the morning to extinguish the light so you didn't waste oil.

[24 : 32] Now for Ida, faithfulness was a crucial part of who she was as a lighthouse keeper. I mean, lives were at stake. She had to be there every night, twice, you know, sundown, midnight, sunup, and at the right time to make sure lives weren't lost.

Well, faithfulness is a crucial part of who we are, not as lighthouse keepers, but as God's chosen people. For we are to reflect his character to the nations around us, including his faithfulness.

So let's pray that God would help us to be faithful. Let's pray. Our gracious Heavenly Father, we do thank you for this reminder this morning that faithfulness does matter.

Father, we thank you that you have been faithful to us, even to the point of giving up your only son Jesus to die for us. And so Father, because you have brought us into your family, help us to reflect your likeness and to be faithful in life, whether it's to each other, certainly to you, and if we are married to our spouses.

Father, we ask these things in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen. Amen. Amen. Amen.