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The Destruction of Community

Malachi 2:10-16

We are addressing a difficult passage primarily because the Hebrew is incredibly difficult to translate in vv. 12, 15, & 16. As a result, there are different interpretations of this passage. Some think this passage is all about divorce (they interpret vv. 10-13 in light of vv. 14-16). Yet many others view the text more broadly (they interpret vv. 14-16 in light of vv. 10-13) which will be how I approach our study today.

With Malachi, we are talking about mechanistic Christianity. Is this in reference to the Roman Catholic teaching of *ex opera operata* which views the means of grace as having

power in and of themselves to produce Kingdom benefit? That is NOT how I am using the expression. By mechanistic Christianity I am referring to rote Christianity or mindless Christianity.

For example, have you ever been at the end of a shower and not remembered if you washed your hair? That is *mechanistic living*... its going through the motions of life without really thinking about what you are doing or why you are doing it. In this mode, each day blends into the next and before you know, it has been days since you've had a significant interaction with anyone much less a loved one.

In this vein, mechanistic Christianity is forgetting the focus, substance, and end of Christianity — which is Jesus Christ — and simply going through the motions of religion as if the motions themselves were the end or what God wanted. It is doing religion because that's what you do.

Now, at times a Christian may awake from this trance and take stock of their walk. If they discover they aren't what they want to be, they may criticize God, question His program for their growth, and in its place seek a personalized religion designed to meet their needs.

This is where God's people were in Malachi's day. They had become bored with God. Yet they didn't go so far as to reject Him altogether. Rather they morphed the religion of God so that it met their personal wants and perceived needs. Accordingly, God sent Malachi to them NOT to condemn them, BUT to bring them back to a healthy walk.

After an important introduction in which God reaffirms His love for His people (Malachi 1:1-5), this book contains seven definitive sections in which Malachi addresses areas where their living had been compromised.

- In Malachi 1:6-14 he addressed their Worship.
- In Malachi 2:1-9 he addressed the Pulpit.
- Now the focus is on the impact that their mechanistic living had on the fellowship of their community.

Malachi began by addressing the dangers of mechanistic Christianity, the destruction of community. The Symptoms, vv. 10, 14.- of which he referenced two, the first being the trampling underfoot the body life of God's people.

Malachi 2:10, "Do we not all have one father? Has not one God created¹ us? Why do we deal treacherously² each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?"

Consider each question. "Do we not all have one father?" This most likely is in reference to Abraham (although some take it in reference to God).³ The point is that

on account of Abraham or God's work of redemption, we are family, and if family then we have obligations one to another that go beyond worldly relationships.⁴

Notice further; "has not one God created us?" The focus behind this is the doctrine of Creator Rights.

Revelation 4:11, "Worthy art Thou, our Lord and our God, to receive glory and honor and power; for Thou didst create all things, and because of Thy will they existed, and were created."

Here the doctrine of Creator Rights is the basis for John's statement that God alone should be worshipped! Yet in our passage the focus is on the fact that because of God's work of creation our time, talents, money, and the like are NOT our own, BUT belong to God who therefore has the right to dictate what we do with them (cf. 1 Corinthians 12:7). In this case, the focus is on our obligation to the body of Christ and the call to use our gifts and resources to build it up- which brings us to the last question which is the climax of the verse.

If the previous two points are true, then "why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" The "covenant" is that which was made with Abraham and reaffirmed with Isaac, Jacob, Moses, and David. What specifically is this covenant? While there are many facets to it, the focus here is on the community and so the bond established between God's people as a result of God's redeeming work.

Genesis 17:7, "And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you."

This promise created a Covenant Community which brought an obligation for the body to look outward and so care for the weak, poor, and hurting. In fact, God set the standard.

Jeremiah 22:16, "He pled the cause of the afflicted and needy; then it was well. Is not that what it means to know Me?" declares the LORD."

Because of the love God gives to the saved individual, a fundamental characteristic of the covenant was born. Specifically, the call for each of us to love the body — including the weak, hurting, and needy — as Christ loves it!

This was a radical ethic. In the ancient world, sick, weak, and hurting people were understood to be suffering the consequences of their or someone else's sin (cf. John 9:2). As such, to help them was to endorse their sin! Yet such was NOT to be the case amongst the people of God. In Judaism/Christianity, the poor, weak, and needy were

to be the special object of love as a testimony and picture of the gospel! Accordingly, God commanded His people...

Exodus 22:21-24a, "And you shall not wrong a stranger or oppress him, for you were strangers in the land of Egypt. You shall not afflict any widow or orphan. If you afflict him at all, *and* if he does cry out to Me, I will surely hear his cry; and My anger will be kindled..."

Again, because of God's commitment to the weak and hurting, a natural ethic arose: if you don't care for the needy in the body, the covenant blessings of God will be withheld (which is exactly what happened at this time, cf. Malachi 2:13b)!

And so, we read the question Malachi posed to the people of God at this time: "[If we are family] why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers?" (cf. Malachi 3:5)

As we've seen, when Christianity becomes rote it eventually becomes all about you- which will have a massive impact upon the body life/community of a fellowship. You will attend worship NOT to give all you have to God, BUT to get from Him. You will go to a fellowship gathering where you expect others to notice and care about you. You will read the word and pray for inspiration. When this occurs, the calling of the covenant when it comes to our responsibility to the body is compromised.

We see it in the Churches of Galatia. When Christianity was all about them, their fellowship was destroyed. Paul wrote, "But if you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another." (Gal. 5:15)

In contrast: when our walk is the overflow of a relationship with God, love for the body will always be the result.

1 John 4:19-20, "We love, because He first loved us. [as that is true, then it stands to reason...] If someone says, 'I love God,' and hates his brother, he is a liar; for the one who does not love his brother whom he has seen, cannot love God whom he has not seen."

Truly when mechanistic Christianity sets in, it becomes all about you! God is viewed as a product and so a Being who lives to bless you! And so ultimately, the body is there for you to consume!

How do we reverse this? It begins by going back to the Foundational Message God gave to His people in Malachi, "I have loved you!" (Malachi 1:2) That is the point of 1 John 4. The more we come to understand and know the love that God has for us, the more we will love others! Now in the context of the body life of the church, there is one community where mechanistic Christianity will be impossible to hide, marriage (which is

the most intimate relationship a person can have with another outside of Christ).

Marriage, v. 14.

Malachi 2:14, “Yet you say, ‘For what reason?’ [why is God not blessing our acts of devotion (cf. v. 13)?] Because the LORD has been a witness⁵ between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion^{6,7} and your wife by covenant^{8,9}.”

From Nehemiah we know the background. God’s people, bored with God, fell into a life of serving self. In time this became brazen such that they did whatever pleased them no matter how vile (for as long as it feels real, it must be). Well, that vileness manifested itself, with many at this time divorcing their Jewish wives in order to marry Gentile women. We see the tip of the iceberg in Nehemiah which was written the same time as Malachi.¹⁰

Nehemiah 13:23, “In those days I [Nehemiah] also saw that the Jews had married women from Ashdod, Ammon, and Moab.”

In fact, this compromise was found even in the household of the high priest (cf. v. 28)¹¹! From Nehemiah it sounds as though the problem was simply God’s people intermarrying with the Gentiles of Palestine. Yet the language of Malachi speaks of a “treachery” involving men sinning against their wives and God’s hatred of divorce (Malachi 2:16). Together, there is little question that many of the Jews in Malachi’s day were divorcing their wives in favor of Gentile women. T. V. Moore put it this way:

The woman whom you have wronged was the companion of those earlier and brighter days of your life when, in the bloom of her young beauty she left her father’s house and shared in your early struggles and rejoiced in your later success, who walked arm in arm with you along the pilgrimage of your 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 her 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 holiest affections by putting an idolater and a heathen in her place. (Moore, 1979, p. 134)

So, we have before us the symptoms of an ill faith. Rather than giving a blessing to the body, we view the body as something that exists for us! Rather than blessing the spouse of our youth, we use them up and discard them when they fail to meet our needs!

How is it possible for genuine believers to get to this place in their walks? Malachi answers that question in vv. 11-13.

The Compromise of God's Worship, vv. 11-12.

Malachi 2:11, "Judah has dealt treacherously, and an abomination¹² has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD which He loves, and has married the daughter of¹³ a foreign god."

While some take this verse in reference to the people of God as a whole (viewing the "sanctuary" in reference to God's people), most likely the focus here is on the literal sanctuary which under the poor leadership of the priests had been compromised/profaned!^{14,15}

The language of being "married [to] the daughter of a foreign god" indicates that, just as in olden times prior to the exile, God's priests here were worshipping God with the liturgy of the religions around them.^{16,17} Because of that, God gave this strong warning...

Malachi 2:12, "As for the man who does this [the priest], may the LORD cut off¹⁸ from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the LORD of hosts."

No Bible commentator really knows what is meant by the expression, "everyone who awakes and answers."¹⁹ Yet the warning is clear... if any man/leader compromises the worship of God and so "the offerings of the Lord"... if they are guilty of "profaning God's sanctuary", Malachi prays that the Lord would cut them off — either through deposition, excommunication, or death. Paul said much the same in 1 Corinthians 3:16-17!

As we have seen, at the heart of our walk with Christ lies worship! That is why the first thing God addressed when it came to the Priests of Malachi's day was the worship they offered (Malachi 1:6-14)!

Don't Miss It! At the most fundamental level worship is NOT simply an activity of the Christian, BUT our identity as believers (cf. Philippians 3:3; John 4:23)!

As such, avoiding mechanistic Christianity begins when we understand that in Christ, we have become priests who live their lives at all times in the presence of God! Accordingly, life is NOT about placating God so that someday we might enter into His presence when we die. RATHER, it is about giving our lives to a Being who loves us so much that He brought us into His presence!

So why is it that God's people fell into such egregious sin in Malachi's day? Their worship had been compromised. As we have seen, it was all about them, their wants, desires, and perceived needs. Now closely on the heels of this came the cancer of moralism- which brings us to the second reason why God's people fell into such

egregious sin at this time...

The Compromise of God's Salvific Grace, v. 13.

Malachi 2:13, "And this is another thing you do: you cover the altar of the LORD with tears,²⁰ with weeping and with groaning,²¹ because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand."

The picture here is of the Gentile worship of Canaan. Recall the account of Elijah's conflict with the 450 prophets of Baal. Elijah organized a competition with the 450 prophets of Baal to determine the true God. They were to prepare the same sacrifice and then call upon their God to devour it with fire. Once the offerings were prepared, remember how the prophets of Baal approached their deity, they sought to placate him by self-abuse.

1 Kings 18:26-29, "Then they took the ox which was given them and they prepared it and called on the name of Baal from morning until noon saying, 'O Baal, answer us.' But there was no voice and no one answered. And they leaped about the altar which they made. And it came about at noon, that Elijah mocked them and said, 'Call out with a loud voice, for he is a god; either he is occupied or gone aside, or is on a journey, or perhaps he is asleep and needs to be awakened.' [Elijah's mockery did not detour them... it served only to make them more devout. Notice...] So they cried with a loud voice [the idea behind this is that they were yelling, screaming, weeping and lamenting. When this didn't work, we read that they...] and cut themselves according to their custom with swords and lances until the blood gushed out on them. And it came about when midday was past, that they raved until the time of the offering of the evening sacrifice; but there was no voice, no one answered, and no one paid attention."

That is how the Gentiles approached their god. Their deities were NOT beings who condescended to man's level and so initiated a relationship with them. RATHER, they were cold, far-off deities who had to be manipulated, assuaged, and so placated in order for them to be moved.

And that is what God's people were doing here (cf. also Ezekiel 8:14). Having adopted the liturgy of the nations, they soon adopted their mindset and so concluded that God didn't love them! No! He was a far off being whose love must be earned!

Christian, more than anything, this is the cause of mechanistic Christianity! I've said it before, there are only two ways a Christian lives before God. One is based on performance. The other will be based on the relationship God established with them in Christ.

When our life is based on our performance, Christianity will be all about you. And

when you fall short, Christianity will be all about placating God! When this occurs take note: the body life of the Church will be treacherous, and our marriages will become warfare!

So, what ought we to do? That brings us to the charge as it relates to our marriages.

Malachi 2:15-16a, “But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. ‘For I hate divorce,’²² says the LORD, the God of Israel...”

Like we saw in v. 12, the first half of this verse is unintelligible.²³ So we are left with the latter part of this verse which is straight forward. The charge is for God’s people to “take heed then, to your spirit.” The expression is a call for us to be mindful what we think, how we think, and what we allow our hearts to desire. It is the opposite of mechanistic Christianity which focusses on the externals of religion. We see this exhortation throughout Scripture.

Proverbs 4:23, “Watch over your heart with all diligence, for from it flow the springs of life.”

Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders this way:

Acts 20:28a, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock...”

Paul wrote to Timothy:

1 Timothy 4:16a, “Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching...”

Accordingly, when it comes to our marriage relationships, we must “Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. ‘For I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel...” This “taking heed to oneself” involves at least two things in the context of this passage:

1. With every marital conflict, ask yourself, “What is it that I am seeking from my spouse that can only come from Christ?” You would be amazed at how many conflicts would be avoided if both partners were living by the grace of God.
2. In the context of your marriage, daily remind yourself why God gave you your spouse. The words for “helper” (the woman’s role) and “love” (the man’s role) are redemptive words used of Christ’s role in the life of a believer! Accordingly, their co-identification reminds us that a wife and husband’s call is to enable their spouse to be what God intends, not what they intend!

So, in the context of our marriages we must “take heed to our spirit” and so what we

think, desire, and focus on. Notice the second Charge...

As It Relates to our Body Life as a Church, v. 16b.

Malachi 2:16b, “‘For I hate divorce,’ says the LORD, the God of Israel. ‘and [this is the second thing that displeases God] him who covers his garment with wrong,’ says the LORD of hosts. ‘So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously.’”

The expression to “cover [one’s] garment with wrong” speaks of a murderous crime where the blood of the victim covers one’s garment (cf. also Isaiah. 1:15; 59:3; Ezekiel 23:37). As such, it was used of all kinds of gross injustices which leave their mark on our lives for all to see. While it most certainly would include divorce, it also would reference the harm that was being perpetrated against the larger community on account neglect or misuse. In this regard, there are only two possibilities when it comes to any covenant community and Its Witness. The world will consider how we treat each other and conclude.

Either that we are Christians- in accord with:

John 13:35, “By this all men will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.”²⁴

Or that Christ is a sham- in accord with:

Romans 2:22-24a, “You who say that one should not commit adultery, do you commit adultery? You who abhor idols, do you rob temples? You who boast in the Law, through your breaking the Law, do you dishonor God? For ‘The name of God is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you.’...”

Accordingly, we are called to “take heed to our spirit” that we might ever and always bring honor to the name of Christ by loving the body to the utmost!

Now, as with last week’s passage, we all are going to fail here! Whether it be in the context of marriage or the body life in our church, we all will fall short. Yet, isn’t great to know that God in Christ hasn’t and won’t? He is the perfect husband who never will give up on His children. Think of it, if before we were born He set His love upon us, then nothing you do in time or space could forfeit that love commitment. Accordingly, living in light of the security of God’s love (Malachi 1:2), may we respond to this third evaluation of our living with a greater hunger and thirst for God!

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End Note(s)

¹ Every time the word “create” is used in the OT it refers to God’s sovereign authority.

² “*Bāgad*, ‘to act faithlessly or treacherously,’ is used in association with several dimensions of the relationship and the laws or expectations pertaining to them. Used of marital relationships, it typically signifies mistreatment of a spouse and points to ‘an objectively measurable offensive behavior (cf. Exod 21:8; Mal 2:14).’ Used of social relationships, *bāgad* signifies the breach in the relationship, and the kinship of God’s people in particular (Malachi 2:10, 16; cf. Ps 73:15). Furthermore, *bāgad* in the social realm includes violating the covenantal requirements, ordinances, commandments, ritual laws, and so on (1 Samuel 14:33; Leviticus 7:26; 17:10; Psalm 78:57).” (Jacobs, 2017, pp. 239-240)

³ “There is scriptural precedent for ‘Abraham your father’ (Isaiah 51:2), an interpretation favoured by Jerome and Calvin, and Malachi makes frequent mention of Jacob (1:2; 2:12; 3:6), from whom the twelve tribes (fathers) descended. There can be little doubt but that Malachi intended we to mean fellow Jews, so, even if he had in mind God as the one father, he was not thinking in terms of ‘the universal brotherhood of man’. His concern was rather for evidence of brotherly loyalty within the nation of Israel.” (Baldwin, 1972, pp. 258-259)

⁴ “If one God made them into a people at the beginning and entered into a fatherly relationship with them (Deut. 32:6), then they owe covenant loyalty to him alone.” (Duguid, 2010, pp. 214-215)

⁵ “In this matter the Lord would act as a ‘witness’ of the broken covenant. In antiquity, witnesses were not merely observers of the agreement; they could be called upon to enforce its terms. This was especially true in the case where deities were invoked as witnesses to a covenant.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 217)

⁶ “The word companion, which is often used in the masculine of a close friend, with whom interests, good or bad are shared (Psalms 119:63; Proverbs 28:24; Song of Solomon 1:7; 8:13; Isaiah 1:23; Ezekiel 37:16, AV, RV; Daniel 2:17), is used only here of a wife. Malachi is a quiet witness to a mutually satisfying marriage relationship which, though begun in youth, does not become jaded with the passing of time.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 261)

⁷ “This word is unique in the Old Testament, but a related verbal form is used in architecture for a seam or joint in a building and to describe the process of bonding or cementing something together. Marriage is not merely a legal obligation; it is to be a close and intimate relationship that cannot be easily dissolved without significant damage to both parties.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 218)

⁸ “The Law of Hammurabi decreed that marriage was a legal contract to be drawn up with the appropriate documents, but the Israelite saw it as a covenant to which the Lord was witness (Genesis 31:50; Proverbs 2:17) and for that reason the more binding.” (Baldwin, 1972, pp. 260-261)

⁹ “This covenant explicitly forbade intermarrying with other nations on religious grounds (Deut.

7:3–4), yet the practice was apparently widespread among the Israelites on their return from exile (see Ezra 9; Nehemiah 13:23–27).” (Duguid, 2010, p. 215)

¹⁰ Cf. also Ezra 9:1–2.

¹¹ “In Malachi’s day there were many divorces and many mixed marriages of God’s people with unbelievers, which is a matter related to divorce. Worse yet, the problem even existed among the priests, who should have resisted the breakups of godly homes in Israel but who encouraged them instead.” (Boice, 2006, p. 587)

¹² The word for “abomination” is a strong term used for idols and for the practices connected with their worship (Deuteronomy 32:16; Isaiah 44:19).

¹³ The expression “daughter of” implied ‘bearing the character of’ a deity.

¹⁴ “At issue is whether *qōdeš*, the masculine noun, refers to the temple or to something that is holy to Yahweh, including the people or the covenant.²⁸⁸ A reference to the people of Yahweh might reflect the postexilic terminology of Ezra 9:1–2, including the perspective that intermarriages are abominations with negative repercussion for the holy seed (*zera* ‘*haqqōdeš*). Alternatively, the expression *qōdeš yhwh* may refer to the character of Yahweh, the holiness of Yahweh—which is most likely the meaning in Malachi 2:11.” (Jacobs, 2017, p. 243)

¹⁵ “‘The holiness of Yahweh which he loves’ in Mal 2:11 probably refers, then, to the newly rebuilt temple that Judah’s behavior had profaned...” (Richard A. Taylor, 2004, p. 333)

¹⁶ “As it stands, Malachi 2:11b α indicates that the treachery is the defilement of Yahweh’s holiness, a charge similar to that brought against the priests in Mal 1:12. While 2:11b α is not a direct reference to Asherah or to a goddess, it sets the stage for the indictment against practices leading to idolatry (2:11b β) thus signaling the connection between defiling the covenant and worshipping other gods (cf. Deut 17:2–7).” (Jacobs, 2017, p. 244)

¹⁷ “Yehud, the community, is depicted as someone who married (*bā* ‘*al*) the daughter of a foreign god (*bat*- ‘*el nēkār*), highlighting the presence of other deities and covenants with the worshipers of other deities. The singular formulation (‘*el nēkār*) may denote a particular foreign deity, but none is identified in the text of Malachi. The conceptual framework is that marriage to foreigners leads to idolatry because the foreigners’ religious practices influence the Israelites toward idolatry (Exod 34:12–16).” (Jacobs, 2017, p. 245)

¹⁸ “Malachi pronounces the covenant curse of ‘cutting off’ (*kārat*) on those who are guilty of this abomination. This verb can be used to describe the sentence of excommunication or execution.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 216)

¹⁹ “[This] is an idiom, the exact meaning of which is uncertain, though various suggestions have been made. One is that the metaphor arose from the rote learning of pupil from teacher (cf. Vulg.; AV the master and the scholar); another, reflected in RV him that waketh and him that answereth, envisages a nomadic custom of keeping watch round the tents at night; this agrees with the mention of the tents of Jacob; nomads or settlers (NEB) is based on Arabic.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 260)

²⁰ “Covering the Lord’s altar with ‘tears’ while ‘weeping’ and groaning’ is not a mark of true repentance here; rather, this is a reference to pagan-style practices that were influencing the worship of the temple (cf. Ezekiel 8:14).” (Duguid, 2010, p. 217)

²¹ “...he comments on excessive displays of emotion, intended, apparently, to move God into granting long-awaited answers to prayer.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 260)

²² Ian Duguid wrote of this, “The Hebrew of verse 16 is also difficult and some English translations have modified the text to make the Lord the subject: ‘I hate divorce!’ Yet in view of the permission granted by the Lord in Deuteronomy 24 and Ezra 9–10 that allows for divorce under certain circumstances, it is better to take the subject as an unspecified individual who does two things- ‘hates’ and ‘divorces’.” (Duguid, 2010, p. 219)

²³ “Here the text becomes difficult, having suffered perhaps at the hand of scribes who took exception to its teaching. [One guide to interpretation is that it must agree with the clear intention of Malachi, expressed at the end of the verse, to encourage husbands to remain true to their first wife.] It is impossible to make sense of the Hebrew as it stands, and therefore each translation, including the early versions, contains an element of interpretation.” (Baldwin, 1972, p. 261)

²⁴ “The uniform, the badge, that testifies to one’s salvation in God is unity with other believers. In the OT this community of faith was the nation of Israel. In the NT, it is the church. The badge

that proves you're a believer of the Lord Jesus Christ is your love for others, particularly for the community of faith—no matter the race, nationality, or ethnicity of them." (Micah Fries, 2015, p. Malachi 2:10)