

The Books of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi

Lesson 11: A Son Honors His Father: The Lord's Complaint -- Malachi 1:1-2:16

Imagine a man who loves his father deeply, or so he says. Father's Day comes around, and the man rummages through the house for something to give. He finds a shirt he never liked, two sizes too big, with a stain on the collar he hopes no one will notice. He wraps it carelessly, hands it over with a thin smile, and tells himself he has done his duty. He would never bring such a gift to his boss, or to a client he wanted to impress, or to anyone whose opinion of him mattered. Those people get his best. His father gets whatever happened to be lying around. And the saddest part is that he cannot see anything wrong with it. To him, it counts. It is the thought, after all. But there was no thought in it, only leftovers, and a father's heart can tell the difference.

That is the scene Malachi walks into, except the Father is God Himself. The people of Judah had come back from exile, the temple had been rebuilt, the sacrifices were running again, and on the surface religion looked alive and well. But underneath, something had gone quietly rotten. The priests were carrying lame, blind, and sick animals up to the altar, the rejects of the flock, the ones no buyer would take, and laying them before the Lord as though He would not notice. They kept the healthy lambs for the market and gave God the culls. And like the man with the stained shirt, they could not see the problem. When God said their worship dishonored Him, they actually answered back, surprised: How have we despised your name?

Malachi is built out of these strange little arguments. God makes a charge, the people object as if wounded, and God patiently lays the evidence before them. It begins with the tenderest words a wounded heart can speak: I have loved you, says the Lord. And the people answer, How have you loved us? They have grown so dull that even God's love has become invisible to them. From there the Lord presses the question that gives this lesson its name, the question every honest worshiper must someday face: A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor? If I am a master, where is my fear?

So this is not a lesson about ancient livestock. It is a lesson about the secret quality of our devotion, the part no one else sees. It asks what we actually bring to God when no one is watching: our best hour or our most exhausted one, our first thought or our last, the firstfruits of our money or whatever is left after everything else is paid. It asks the married whether they are keeping covenant faith with the husband or wife of their youth, because God witnesses those vows too. Read these chapters slowly and let them search you. The God who says I have

loved you is not asking for more religion. He is asking for our honor, our reverence, and our best, and He deserves nothing less.

Group Discussion: God charges the priests with bringing Him blind, lame, and sick animals while keeping the good ones for themselves, then asks, “Present that to your governor; will he accept you?” (Malachi 1:8). In what ways do God’s people today still bring Him the leftovers, the second-best of our time, money, energy, and attention, while reserving our best for things and people we are more eager to impress? Why is this so easy to do without ever noticing?

Personal Reflection: Malachi presses the question, “A son honors his father... If then I am a father, where is my honor?” (1:6). Think honestly about what you actually give God when no one is watching: your sharpest hour or your most exhausted one, your first attention or your leftovers. Where in your own worship and walk have you been handing God the stained shirt? Be specific with yourself.

Read Malachi 1:1–2:16

Study Questions

1. Malachi opens not with a rebuke but with a declaration of love: “I have loved you, says the Lord,” and the people answer, “How have you loved us?” (1:2). God points back to His sovereign, covenant love for Jacob (1:2–5). What does it reveal about God that He grounds His complaint against His people in His prior love for them? Why does He establish His love before He names their sin?
2. The people had grown so spiritually dull that they could no longer see God’s love (1:2). Where in your own life have familiarity and routine made you blind to evidences of God’s love that were there all along? What has stopped feeling like grace and started feeling like background noise?
3. God says, “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If then I am a father, where is my honor?” (1:6). What does this teach about the kind of relationship God desires with His people, and about the honor and reverence that rightly belong to Him as Father and Lord?

4. The priests were bringing the “best” of their excuses while bringing God the worst of their flocks (1:6–8). If you examined the quality, and not just the quantity, of what you give God, your worship, your prayer, your giving, your service, what would the quality say about how much you honor Him? Where are you offering God effort you would be embarrassed to offer your employer?
5. God exposes the sin plainly: they offered the blind, the lame, and the sick, animals they would never dare present to their governor (1:8–9, 13–14). What does this teach about the nature of acceptable worship, and about a God who refuses to be honored with our second-best while we keep the best for ourselves?
6. God cries out, “Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire on my altar in vain!” (1:10). He would rather the doors be shut than receive contemptuous worship. Where might your own worship have become a going-through-the-motions that God would call “in vain,” and what would it take to close the gap between your outward acts and your heart?
7. Despite the failure of His people, God declares, “For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name will be great among the nations” (1:11). How is this promise fulfilled in the gospel and in the worship of God by people of every nation in Christ’s church (Acts 2; Revelation 5:9–10)? What does it reveal about God’s purposes that His name will be honored among the nations even when His own people grow careless?
8. God describes the ideal priest in Levi, who “walked with me in peace and uprightness, and turned many from iniquity” (2:6), in sharp contrast to the corrupt priests who “caused many to stumble” (2:8). Whatever your role, parent, teacher, friend, mentor, where is your life

turning people toward God, and where might it be causing others to stumble? Name one relationship where your example matters more than you have admitted.

9. The lesson closes with the hardest charge of all: the people deal “treacherously” with one another and with “the wife of your youth,” profaning the covenant, and God says of the man who breaks faith with his wife by divorce that he “covers his garment with violence,” and “I hate” such treacherous dealing (2:10–16). What does this passage reveal about how seriously God regards the marriage covenant, that He Himself stands as witness to it, and about His call to lifelong covenant faithfulness? How does this both uphold God’s unchanging design for marriage and speak with tenderness to those who have been wounded by its breaking?

10. Look back across these two chapters, from “I have loved you” to “A son honors his father” to the call to covenant faithfulness. Name one specific area, your worship, your giving, your time, your marriage, or another covenant, where the Lord is calling you to stop offering Him leftovers and begin giving Him your honor and your best this week.

Digging Deeper

Reflect on these passages: Romans 12:1, presenting our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God; 2 Corinthians 9:6–7, giving not reluctantly or under compulsion but as we have purposed, for God loves a cheerful giver; Genesis 4:3–7, the contrast between Cain’s careless offering and Abel’s offering of the firstborn; Matthew 19:4–6, Jesus affirming God’s design for lifelong, one-flesh marriage; Revelation 5:9–10, the redeemed of every tribe and nation worshipping the Lamb, the fulfillment of God’s name being great among the nations.

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