

Spiritual Burn Out – Malachi 1:6-14

To begin let me pose you a few statements to ponder:

- How can this happen to me if God love me?
- Where is the God of Justice?
- What's the point in serving God? It doesn't seem to make life any better.
- I'll just give God the minimum and keep the rest for myself.
- I'll keep up the pretence of worship and then no one will really know what's really going on underneath.

These statements arguably represent what you might describe as Spiritual Burnout. Last week when we began this sermon series on Malachi Ian reminded us that in the pressures of life our faith can be slowly rubbed away and we can lose our relationship with God. As we continue to look at the book of Malachi we discover the Israelites were saying things along very similar lines and Malachi tackles the issues they raise head on.

This spiritual burnout is something the people of Malachi's day were experiencing and in our tough times economically, personally and spiritually we can sometimes face similar pressures. At the time of Malachi we witness the Jews having returned to their land after living in exile. The Temple has been rebuilt and the worship of God has been re-established but its nothing like it was in the old days. Just like the issues we are facing today things are not easy for these people. While on the surface things generally seem OK, on the inside a cancer of complacency is eating away at the Israelites commitment.

Last week we also learned that of all the things God wants us to know, the most important is that He loves us. He loves us with a tender, affectionate, and unconditional love. Malachi speaking into this situation "reminded the people of the enduring love of God, of his sovereign election and divine covenant down through the generations. But just as people 2400 years ago wondered if God really loved them, so today people ask the same question.

Today's passage reveals a dialogue centring round a number of questions that show the scepticism of the time - for the people of God are not seriously looking for answers but trying to avoid the truth. In verses 6-14 Malachi exposes the flaws in the worship of the covenant community (in other words the Israelites – God chosen people)'. It was their highest privilege to serve the Lord who had saved them, but because they had lost sight of his love and the blessings he had bestowed on them, they had no real desire to praise him, and their worship had become sterile and corrupt. They were in spiritual burnout.

So what will this passage open up for us today – well if we are to avoid the same spiritual burnout then perhaps three things stand out that can help us

- 1. Honour God's name**
- 2. Honour God's sovereignty**
- 3. Honour God's love**

1. Honour God's name

What do people think of your name? Let me tell you I've received a bit of stick about my name over the years. When I was 19 someone brought out a record that reached number 4 in the charts – it had an unforgettable chorus - Gordon is a moron, Gordon is a moron. I got so much stick you just wouldn't believe it. Then later at 22 I met my lovely wife Ruth. She found my name so difficult she decided to call me 'Thingy'! I even brought her a pendant to wear round her neck – on one side I had the name 'Ruth' inscribed and on the other side the name 'Thingy'. Many of us probably unwittingly attach great deal of significance to our name, it sort of comes to represent us - it's like a badge for our personality, our history and our values and in our passage today we are reminded God's name is similarly important to him because it represents his reputation and honour.

In Malachi 1:6, God accuses Israel of betraying his name. As their father and master, where was the respect and honour due to him? In verse six we hear 'A son honours his father, and a servant his master'. Honour and respect for the father of the family or the master of the slave would have been perfectly normal within the culture of the time and yet God points out through Malachi how they are failing to recognise their ultimate Father and Master – in other words God - and showing complete disrespect for His name.

The problem was Malachi was facing a people and priests in what Ian described last week as a dull and dark time. They were oblivious to any wrong doing in their own behaviour towards God and yet they were failing to honour God, they were failing to recognise who He was, He's awesomeness, His power, His glory. They were discrediting his name.

God deserves to be honoured because He is holy. Interestingly the phrase , **"Lord Almighty"** appears seven times in these nine verses and 23 times in the whole of Malachi. When we utter the words "Lord Almighty" I wonder what we think? Do we recognise the fact that God is who He is; He is holy, He is to be revered, He's the one who causes everything else. He is unchanging, the one who inhabits eternity and has infinite authority across the universe, indeed across everything.

Now lets also consider the last part of verse 6 and verse 7 where we read "It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name" – suddenly this is not just about the people – this verse now turns squarely on to the priests. It tells us they were showing **"contempt"** for God. They were despising their duties and basically taking God for granted. It is astonishing they had the nerve to respond to the Lord Almighty with: **"How have we shown contempt for your name?"** God of course responds - **"You place defiled food on my altar."** Unbelievably, the priests persist: **"How have we defiled you?"** God replies, **"By saying that the Lord's Table is contemptible."**

So what's going on? Sadly the priests and the people were just going through the motions – they'd forgotten who God really is and allowed the extraordinary (the Lord Almighty) to become ordinary. Let's remind ourselves again as we hear the priests ask

God: 'How have we shown contempt for your name?' In Verse 8 God gives his answer: "When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?"

The law said that when the people brought sacrifices to God, they should be the best. (*Leviticus 1:3* " *If the offering is a burnt offering from the herd, he is to offer a male without defect*). Basically they should not be sick or diseased animals, they should be perfect. No animals with broken legs, no animals with skin infections and sores. No, God wanted the best. But what are the people doing? They are bringing God what is second best. Imagine someone getting an old goat, blind in one eye with a broken leg and then saying 'That'll do, who's going to notice – what difference will it make anyway?' Instead of offering their first fruits they were offering their leftovers. And to make matters worse the priests were allowing it to happen. And so God accused them of dishonouring him and he wasn't pleased.

If this sounds tough now think of it from a New Testament perspective where instead of offering animals for sacrifice we are challenged and called ourselves to be living sacrifices to God. (*Romans 12:1* *Therefore, I urge you, brothers, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God—this is your spiritual act of worship.*) If we give to God only our leftover time, money, and energy, we repeat the same sin as these worshippers who didn't want to bring anything valuable to God. What we give God also reflects our true honour towards him.

So do whatever you can to avoid just going through the motions and do whatever we can to ensure your love, desire and response to God is burning 'red hot' for Him recognising God for who he really is. The Lord Almighty.

2. Honour God's sovereignty

Verse 8 continues: "Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty.' Let's bring this into the context of today. When my daughter Lorna was about four she wrote to the Queen and invited her for tea. Well we got a letter back but reluctantly the Queen declined. That was probably just as well because imagine how much time we would have spent cleaning the house and preparing the best possible tea. I'm sure if it had happened we'd have offered our very best. It certainly wouldn't have been moldy sandwiches and sour milk in her tea. Not that I'm suggesting we ever have anything like that in our house! If the queen came for tea we'd give her the utmost respect. Now if we do that for our earthly monarch, then what about our heavenly King?

In Malachi's time the people's offerings to God could be characterized by expedience – being as cheap as possible, through neglect – not caring how they offered the sacrifice, and through outright disobedience – sacrificing their own way and not as God had commanded. So what about us? For example: When giving to God do we offer our money as the first thing that comes out of our earnings or do we give to God our leftover change?

Do we give the first of our time to God or do we only offer God our time when it's convenient to us. Is it only after everything else is taken care of, that we'll give a moment's thought to God? Malachi's message is clear - offering our leftovers shows contempt for God's sovereignty.

Now look at verse 10: "Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD Almighty, "and I will accept no offering from your hands.

Imagine coming along on a Sunday morning and finding the doors to the church locked – how would you feel? Basically God would much rather have us shut down the church than come to Him with inappropriate sacrifice and worship. You see God doesn't actually need us to give Him anything but nevertheless living out a life of sacrifice and serving is still crucial – why? Look at verse 11 - God mentions sacrifice and before and afterwards states "my name will be great among the nations. Now look at verse 14 - Again God refers to sacrifice and then follows it with "I am a great King" - "my name is to be feared among the nations". Sacrifice is directly linked to the greatness of God. That's why when we give Him our best we are grasping the greatness of God. However, when we offer Him little or nothing, we are really saying that God doesn't matter much to us. When we fail to celebrate God's greatness by giving Him our best, our priorities are focuses elsewhere and we are in danger of becoming bored with God and excited about the world.

God says: "my name will be great among the nations". God had chosen the people, the Jews, through whom he planned to save and bless the entire world. Today God still wants to save and bless the entire world through all who believe in him – Jews and Gentiles. Christians are now his chosen people, and our pure offering to the Lord is our new life in Christ. Are we living sacrifices available to God to be used in making his name great among the nations? This mission now belongs to us – those who follow Jesus Christ. The alternative is we become like the priests described in verse 13 finding the whole worship of God a burden. Is it all rather tiresome? And yet as intermediaries between God and the people, these priests were responsible for reflecting God's attitudes and character. By accepting imperfect sacrifices, they were leading the people to believe that God accepted those sacrifices as well.

As followers of Christ we are all priests so what image of God's character do others see in us? If we casually accept sin, we are just like these priests in Malachi's day - simply going through the motions. So some questions : Do we present a positive image of Jesus to our friends, family and work colleagues. Do we reflect Jesus in the way we live out our lives. Before each day be it Sunday or any day do we pray before hand that God would speak to us, that we'd be able to encourage others by our presence and words?

Worship which costs us nothing benefits us nothing. Particularly in tough times, we can find ourselves just going through the motions and for our hearts to be cold as stone. It's all too easy to say 'Do I have to give up my Sunday's to go to church?' Do I have to give up my time to help with this group or serve in this way? Why should I?

Just like the Israelites, almost without realizing it, any one of us can slip into showing contempt for God's name through offering only what is second best and allowing our worship to become apathetic. So how do we avoid this?

Remember what an awesome God our God is. The people had forgotten that the God who loved them was also king of the whole world. Verse 5: 'Great is the Lord -even beyond the borders of Israel!' Verse 11: "My name will be great among the nations.' Verse 14, For I am a great king, ... my name is to be feared among the nations."

The root cause of the people's spiritual apathy and complacency is that they had forgotten their side of their covenant relationship with God and lost sight of His blessings and who it was that they were worshipping. We too can so easily forget the **sovereignty of God**.

3) Honour God's love

Imagine someone saves your life and willingly gives his own life in the process – would you respond with apathy and complacency. No you'd most likely respond with passionate, meaningful love. You see this awesome God loves us so much that he sent his one and only Son to die for us. Our sins have been forgiven and we have been given the gift of eternal life. So what we discover in Malachi cannot possibly save us but after we have become Christians it can guide us to live as God requires. As New Testament Christians we are fortunate that God has provided a way of salvation that depends on Jesus Christ, not our own efforts. Although we must guard against the temptation of using service, good deeds or any other effort as a substitute for faith we can open our hearts and truly recognize what Jesus has done for us and therefore seek to respond with joyful worship and service putting God's name above all others and joyfully giving him the very best of everything.

So before we close just a couple of thoughts. When going to church we generally know what's going to happen in a service, so it's easy sometimes to just go through the motions. Other times we may come along hoping that we are going to be entertained. Is that the way we want to respond to God's love grace and mercy as revealed through Jesus Christ?. When we come to church we are not the audience, God is. And what is our reason for coming to church in the first place? Are we here to just to get something for ourselves - is that the way we want to respond to God's love grace and mercy as revealed through Jesus Christ. Or do we come because we have an appointment with God? Instead of wondering if a service helps you, or determining if you *liked* it or not, the real issue is this: *Did I meet with God today and to some degree, did I grasp His greatness?*

God is saying that His name will be great, whether we acknowledge it or not. The party will go on without us. God told Israel that His greatness and His grace will be given to the Gentiles and that's what's happening right now. Malachi challenged the people then and in many ways challenges us today to put aside all spiritual apathy and spiritual complacency and come back to the true and living God. Rejoice that this awesome holy God loves you. Don't give him second best but instead remember that this God – the Lord Almighty - is our King, the one before whom one day we will all bow.