

During a service of infant baptism one of the questions asked used to be: "Parents and godparents the child whom you have brought for Baptism depends chiefly on you for the help and encouragement he needs. Are you willing to give it to him by your prayers, by your example and by your teaching."

Often when talking with parents about this I would explain that our children's faith should be our great concern as we pray for them and teach them from the Bible. But I used to point out children also learn from our example and they see from what we do what is important to us. The idea was to help parents see that if they rarely came to church their children would quickly see that church wasn't important.

What we do shows what we believe. It shows our core values.

I wonder what you have done over the last few days and what it shows about your core values?

On Thursday I drove round the M25 to see my grandchildren – family matter.

Yesterday I drove down to Bath to see Kettering Town – they matter. However with so much driving you might question whether the environment matters!

Can you see what I am saying we show by our actions what matters and, if you like, where our loyalties lie. But how do we show that God matters? How do we show our loyalty to him?

As we have been seeing over recent weeks the thread of Malachi was that the actions of God's people were showing that God didn't come high in their priority list.

The people were going through tough times since they had returned from exile in Babylon. Their problems over money and food and national pride was rubbing away at their faith in God.

Their big question was did God care for them?

God's answer as we saw in the first of the series was yes, "I have loved you" (Mal 1:2) the words of God's covenant love for his people. God was keeping his covenant of love with his people but were they? The answer God gave them through Malachi was no they weren't.

We see that

a. in 1:13 where the people described sacrifices as a "burden" and through their whole attitude to them were seen to be "sniffing contemptuously" at God. Their actions spoke of an inner attitude which saw worship as a drag and God as unimportant.

Then we see it

b. in 2:8 where God accused the priests of leading people into sin through their teaching and through that violating the covenant. God could see that his people were not taking him seriously. Their loyalty was not to him.

Today we see it

c. in 2:10 where Malachi speaks on behalf of the people and acknowledges what they will not that they were disrespecting the covenant by being faithless to each other.

Malachi was clear that God was faithful to his people and God's people should be faithful to God and to each other.

In these verses we see that they were not loyal to God or to each other.

1. Actions spoke loudly

In these verses we see to actions that are described as "breaking faith" God accusing his people of being 'Promise Brokers' that is those who broke promises.

a. they were breaking faith with God, v11-12.

"Judah (that is God's people) has broken faith (with God)" (v11). How, "by marrying the daughter of a foreign god".

From the earliest times God had told his people Israel not to marry non-Jews. Now you may ask why? The answer is there for us at the end of v11 the non-Jew belonged to a foreign god. The allegiance of the non-Jew was to another god and so for the Jew to be married to a non-Jew was both to break the covenant with God and to compromise his own faith. It was a continual problem for the Jews. Solomon was supposed to be the wisest man in the world. God told him 1 Kings 11.2 "They were from nations about which the LORD had told the Israelites, You must not intermarry with them, because they will surely turn your hearts after their gods". So what did he do? 1 Kings 11.1, "King Solomon, however, loved many foreign women besides Pharaoh's daughter— Moabites, Ammonites, Edomites, Sidonians and Hittites" and what was the result 1 Kings 11.4, "As Solomon grew old, his wives turned his heart after other gods, and his heart was not fully devoted to the LORD his God, as the heart of David his father had been." And he was the wisest man. The people of Malachi's time were in the same situation. Faith in God had been rubbed away and they had lost touch with God to the extent that it didn't matter to them whether they married outside the faith or not. But can you see what had happened? Having lost faith in God their loyalty had gone and so they married women who didn't share their faith and so introduced another factor which would take them further away from God. The loss of reality of faith opened the doors to a lack of faithfulness to God. The imperceptible abrasion of faith that looses touch with the living God.

As Jesus would later say we can't serve two masters. Here it was literally two religions or two world views that were being accommodated in single families and that as far as God was concerned was one too many. To have the worship of another god in the home was bound to affect the people of God. Friends I don't have to tell those of you who are in a relationship with a partner who doesn't share your faith in Jesus how hard it can be. It puts pressure on your faith and it can put pressure on your relationship with other Christians. All I am saying is what many of you will know and testify to

that being married to someone with a different world view to the Christian has an affect upon our loyalty to God. That is something many live with and I would support you as you seek to live for Jesus in that situation but we all recognise that it is not ideal. The situation here was worse because these people knowing God's law and that they were not as God's people to marry "daughters of foreign gods" were doing just that because God didn't really matter – their actions showed that. They had lost faith in God and that affected their relationship with him. However it also affected their relationship with each other.

b. they were breaking faith with each other v14-16.

"you have broken faith with the wife of your marriage covenant" v14.

I think Malachi mentions divorce here not for itself but as the evidence of the way in which their lack of faith in God affected their relationships and this was one example. The accusation was that they have broken faith with their partner with the wife of the covenant. It was not just the marriage covenant that had been broken but the covenant with God and as such it was a double tragedy. But again it was the loss of real faith in God which brought this about. Because they were no longer in touch with the living God so there was nothing to temper their selfishness.

Again those of you who have been through divorce will recognise the pain involved and that divorce is not ideal. God says in v15 he hates it because marriage is an ordinance of God established from the beginning of time. But having said that there are many other things God hates. He hates the sins that are in me and the mistakes I make and while Malachi uses divorce here he could well have used many other examples of the way in which their lack of loyalty to God affected their relationship with each other, in envy, in adultery, in theft, in hatred. So this is not a stigma to those who have been through divorce but a warning to us that when we stop walking closely with God it is not just our relationship with him that suffers but our relationships with each other.

We see this in the second reading we had today from James 4. If you look at it you'll see the various relationship breakdowns that James speaks about, v1 fights and quarrels v 2 you kill and covet, v11 you slander one another. In other words just that average church meeting! No seriously what was going on? What was their problem? The answer is there in v4 "You adulterous people, don't you know that friendship with the world is hatred towards God? Anyone who chooses to be a friend of the world becomes an enemy of God." They had lost touch with the living God and that was destroying their relationships.

This was what was going on. A lack of faithfulness to God was destroying their relationship with him and with others.

So what did God say about it?

2. God's view

a. I am not pleased. Not surprising really. God showed his displeasure by rejecting their sacrifices and prayers as we see in v13. Their tears were tears of frustration because they weren't getting what they wanted out of God but they were not godly tears. They may not have quite been the tantrum tears of the two year old in Tesco's told he can't have some sweets but that seems to be the area we are in here. Their lack of faith in God led to their breaking of the covenant and those sins had separated them from God. Now we live under a new covenant, one of grace and not law. However, as we think of aspects of our lives is God pleased with them and especially as we think of our relationships – is God pleased? If not we need to repent and under God seek to change and live lives that do please God. Then we will know his blessing.

b. think who you are. God was addressing his people. They were his people and we see that from v10. He was their "Father" and their "creator". God had made them a people and he had called them to be his people. The covenant was at the centre of his relationship with his people and he was asking them to remember that and to act accordingly. They had one God and were one people so how could they turn to other gods and how could they deal badly with each other? It was all a denial of who they were. They were God's covenant people chosen by him but were living just the same as everyone else. God wanted them to think of who they were.

I remember once about the age of 20 arriving home from teacher training college for the summer. I rang my father from the station to get a lift. The car arrived drove round the circle of the Station approach and drove off. A few minutes later he came back and told me that if I ever arrived home dressed like that again he wouldn't pick me up. Clearly the way I was dressed was a slight on him and the family – think who you are!

I am not just the son of my father but the son of my heavenly father and being aware of that daily will enable me to think of who I am and so live God's way which pleases him and which draws me closer to him, strengthening the bond between us not allowing it to be rubbed away. But then God had a clear message for them and for us.

c. guard yourself in your spirit – God said it twice, in v15 and 16.

The spirit signifies that area of their lives which has the capacity of relating to God. That needs to be guarded, to be watched over, for then they will remain close to God. It is only by watching themselves in relation to God that their loyalty to God and to each other will be strengthened. Only with the deepening of the reality of God in their lives and with it a confidence in the covenant love of God will their faithfulness to God grow. It is easier to be faithful to a friend than a stranger and God had become a stranger to them. So the call was to guard their spirit. But what did that mean for them and what does it mean for us?

If what God was saying was guard your spirit, that is your relating to him then how did he see that happening. I took my grandson Caleb for a walk on Friday morning. All was well as we walked along with him holding on to one of my fingers. We went over some rough ground but as he wobbled I was able to hold him upright. Then he let go and suddenly fell flat. Guarding him was making sure he was holding onto me. To guard our spirit is to make sure we are walking with God. Negatively it will mean as it did for those people Malachi was speaking to putting off the things that draw us away from God. But positively it is holding onto God. James in that second reading we had encouraged those whose relationship were falling apart to “come near to God” (James 4:8). We do that as we come together to worship on Sunday – it refreshes and restores us. We do it in our times of quiet as we come to God and grow in God. We do it as we face day by day situations with a God consciousness asking what God would have us do in this situation. We do it by putting God first, loyal to him above everything else.

A lack of faith in God was being shown by these people in poor relationships with God and with each other. Our relationships with each other and with God will only flourish as our faith and love for God grow and to do that we need to come near to God and put him first.