

Malachi: Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy

Does God Love Us? (Malachi 1:1-5)

Preached by Pastor Jason Tarn to HCC on April 8, 2021

Introduction

- ❖ This morning we're starting a new series in the book of Malachi. We're calling it: *Exposing the Dangers of Spiritual Apathy*. **Because if there is one phrase that best describes the people of God during the time of Malachi – it would be spiritual apathy.** As we'll see, they had yet to abandon their religious duties. They still dutifully worshipped at the temple and brought their sacrifices. But they were largely apathetic. Without feeling or emotion. Indifferent. Disinterested. They were going through the motions. Their heart wasn't in it.
 - **And this apathy seemed to stem from a growing, gnawing sense of doubt over God's love for them.** When you feel unloved by God, neglected by God, ignored by God – then it leads to apathy towards God. You feel less love for him, and it becomes much easier to neglect or ignore him. **That's one of the root causes of spiritual apathy – a growing, gnawing sense that God doesn't love me (or even if he does, he probably loves me less than others).**
 - It's to these doubts that Malachi begins his book with an affirmation of God's love for Israel. But immediately that love is questioned. How so? What evidence is there that God actually loves us?
- ❖ Now before we look at our text, it would benefit us to step back and get a better sense of the book's background and context. **First off, though Malachi is the last OT book in your Bible, that doesn't mean it was written chronologically last.** In fact, in ancient Hebrew bibles (which Jesus would have used), 2 Chronicles was the last book. It wasn't until the OT was translated into Greek (Septuagint), that the more familiar ordering of the books was established with Malachi at the end.
 - **But having said that, even though Malachi technically may not have been written last, it was one of the last books of the OT written.** Based on its content, we know Malachi lived during a time after the exiles had returned from Babylon. Jerusalem had been restored. The temple had been rebuilt. Judah was a nation once more. Most scholars date Malachi to the late 5th-century BC around the time of Ezra and Nehemiah (because of similar issues facing the post-exilic community in all three books). It's suggested that Malachi must have been written right before Nehemiah's reforms, which are recorded in his book.
- ❖ So by dating the book in that time period, it explains why the Israelites had grown apathetic towards God. **By Malachi's day, Israel was a mere shadow of its former self.** Exiles had returned – but a vast majority did not. The temple had been rebuilt – but it paled in comparison to the original. They were a nation again – but merely a vassal state to the Persian empire.
 - **While most OT prophets operated during periods marked by great change – Malachi ministered during a period of monotonous waiting.** Sixty to seventy years had passed since the temple has been reconstructed. Yet there was still no evidence of God filling it with his glory or making it a beacon of hope for the nations. God's people were not prospering in a land flowing with milk and honey. They had to endure a wearying time of poverty and foreign domination.

- ❖ **Religious duty continued – but without any passion or any hope.** Instead they were full of questions. Is God still committed to his covenant? Is he going to protect us and prosper us? Is he going to bring justice (2:17)? Because it seems like our enemies are the ones who keep prospering over us. So what's the point? Serving God seems vain (3:14-15). Does worshipping God, sacrificing to God, serving God even matter? Do we even matter to him?
 - **Into these doubts, the word of the LORD comes to Israel by Malachi. “I have loved you,” says the LORD.** Throughout the book, God is going to confront their spiritual apathy as manifested by their conduct and covenant unfaithfulness. But before he confronts and exposes their spiritual apathy, the LORD reminds them of his sovereign, electing love.
 - For ancient Israel to be in the right frame of mind (heart) to hear the rest of this prophecy – and the same goes for modern listeners like us – three things need to happen. We need to (1) understand this concept of God's electing love, (2) cherish God's electing love, and (3) share God's electing love.

Understand God's Electing Love

- ❖ First, we need to understand God's electing love. To speak of God's love is familiar, but what is his electing love? **Electing love is referring to God's love freely bestowed, graciously bestowed, and mysteriously bestowed to undeserving sinners like us without a view to our worth or merit.**
 - This love is distinct from God's general love for all persons in the entire world. God's electing love is the love he set upon Israel – choosing (or electing) them and entering into a covenant with them distinct from all other peoples on the earth. **It's the love with which he loves the Church – his Bride whom he chose and covenanted with.**
 - Think of how a husband loves many women in his life – his mother, mother-in-law, his sisters, or female friends and church members. But he reserves a special covenantal love for his wife. **In the same way, God so loves the world, but he reserves a special covenantal, electing love for Christians.**
- ❖ Listen to Malachi refer to this covenantal, electing love in v2. *"I have loved you," says the LORD. But you say, "How have you loved us?"* So God's affirmation of his love for Israel is immediately doubted and questioned. How so? How have you loved us?
 - **They don't see evidence of this love. Instead, what they do see seems to suggest they've been forgotten and unloved.** We already mentioned their diminished role on the world scene. They were impoverished and struggling to recover as a nation. Particularly, in contrast to the neighboring nation of Edom.
- ❖ **The reason the LORD makes reference to Jacob and Esau is because their descendants are the Israelites and the Edomites.** By Malachi's day, there was great resentment against Edom for how they assisted the Babylonians in their siege of Jerusalem; how they celebrated Judah's downfall and tried to profit off their defeat (Obad 1:10-14). The book of Obadiah is dedicated to condemning the Edomites for their ill treatment of their ancient relatives.

- Now eventually Edom itself was driven out of their land by the Nabataeans (the ancient kingdom that built the famous city of Petra in modern day Jordan), but over time the Edomites appeared to be on the rise and ready to rebuild. You can hear their hopefulness in v4, *“If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins.””*

- ❖ So in addition to the ongoing resentment of Edom, the Israelites were growing jealous of Edom’s apparent prosperity. It appeared as if God had completely overlooked how the Edomites jeered and cheered during the Babylonian siege and captivity. Where is his justice? Where is his love? LORD, you say you have loved us – but how have you loved us?
 - **Before noting any evidence of his love, the LORD recalls back to a time in Israel’s history when Isaac and Rebekah were expecting twin sons.** While in the womb, it says the twins struggled with each other. Rebekah was told that two nations were represented in her womb. The brothers and their descendants will struggle with each other, and the elder will end up serving the younger.
 - Now it turned out that Esau was born first and then Jacob, but as their stories unfold, we learn that God’s covenant promises are given to Jacob and his kin. *“Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the LORD. “Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated.”*

- ❖ Now how does that answer the question, *How have you loved us?* **The Israelites were probably expecting God to list current examples of his love, but instead he brings up his ancient choice to love the younger of twin boys.** But how does that answer the question, *How have you loved us?* Consider with me three things we learn from that answer.

- ❖ **First, it tells us the LORD loved Israel freely.** God doesn't have to love anyone. Some mistakenly assume that because the Bible says God is love, then it means his job is to love everyone. As if he had no choice. **But what we learn in God's answer to Israel is that when he loves you, he chooses to do so freely.** His choice of Jacob proves that.
 - By cultural custom, Esau the elder should have received the greater blessing and inheritance. So it would be natural to expect the covenant promises that God made to their grandfather Abraham to flow through Esau and his line. **And yet the LORD elected Jacob the younger – in order to demonstrate that his electing love is always freely given.** He’s not obligated by cultural custom or natural law to have to choose to love one over the other.

- ❖ **It was God’s free choice to love Jacob and to hate Esau.** Now I know the word “hate” might throw you off. You might be able to accept the idea of God freely choosing to love someone, but you have a hard time with the idea of God freely choosing to hate someone. That’s understandable. **That’s why commentators will emphasize that “hate” in this context conveys – not a personal animosity – but a rejection implied by not being chosen.** But even still, you might be bothered by your fact that God would reject Esau even before he was born. It doesn't seem fair if he starts off life already rejected – while his brother is loved. That’s where the second thing we learn from God's answer is helpful.

- ❖ **Second, the LORD's response tells us he loved Israel graciously.** What we have to keep in mind is that both Jacob and Esau were born under the curse of sin. **That means they both started off life deserving – not God's love – but his rejection.** And when you read their story, you'll find that confirmed. Neither brother is portrayed in a good light.
 - So when Esau is rejected, he's getting what he deserved. Nothing to complain about. Nothing unfair about that. **But when Jacob is loved, he's getting what he doesn't deserve. He's getting grace.** Sure, you can complain about that, but just realize you're complaining about God's graciousness and generosity.

- ❖ We wouldn't have recognized the graciousness of God's electing love had he waited for the twins to grow up before choosing between them. **By choosing to choose Jacob over Esau before they were born – before either had done anything good or bad – God makes clear that his electing love does not respond to human action nor is conditioned by human behavior** (Rom 9:10-13). That means he's not looking for anything intrinsic within an individual before he decides to love.
 - That's consistent with the way God has explained his choice of Israel throughout the OT. **Deuteronomy 7:6-8** reminds God's people not to get puffed up with pride just because they're his treasured possession. Listen to what Moses says, *"⁶For you are a people holy to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. ⁷It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, ⁸but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers."*

- ❖ **That means when God chooses to set his love on you, it's not because he sees something intrinsic in you that's deserving of love.** In fact, if he were to look in you, he would see is that you actually deserve his hate, his antipathy, his wrath. All because of your sin.
 - **But thankfully, when God chooses to love, he's looking within *himself* – to his own gracious freedom to love whomever he chooses and to the particular oaths and covenants he has made with us.** The only thing that bind his love is his own will – his own promises, which he never breaks. So how does God love you? He loves you graciously.

- ❖ **Third, the LORD's answer in v2 tells us that he loved Israel mysteriously.** I understand if it's not satisfying to be told that God freely chose Jacob over Esau without any obvious or observable explanation. We just assume there must be some reason that explains why Jacob was the right choice. But Scripture doesn't reveal it. I'm sure God has his reasons. Scripture never portrays him as arbitrary in his decisions. **But Scripture never promises that God will reveal his reasons or explain himself.** Perhaps he will when we see him face to face, but until then, we have to learn to embrace an element of mystery in our faith.
 - **And that's one of those mysteries in the Christian faith. Why did God choose me?** Why did he choose to set his electing love on me? And not on this other person who eventually died in unbelief? The answer is a mystery.

- ❖ Now your gut response might be: Isn't it because I accepted Christ and he didn't? But that just begs the question – why did you choose to receive Christ while he didn't? **What's the underlying difference between you as a believer and the other person as an unbeliever?**
 - If you say, "Because I came to realize I'm a sinner and he didn't." Then you're suggesting you're more spiritually sensitive. If you say, "Because I humbled myself and he didn't." Then you're saying you're more humble. If you say, "Because I was just willing and he wasn't." Then you're saying you're more willing.

- ❖ You can't avoid it. **As long as you make something in you (or about you) the reason why you're a Christian and the other person isn't, then in the end you do have something to boast in over the other guy.** You're more sensitive to spiritual things. You're more humble. You're more willing. Even if it's ever so slight, there's still something for you to boast in.
 - But that just flies in the face of biblical teaching. **Ephesians 2:8-9** states, “*For by grace you have been saved through faith. And this is not your own doing; it is the gift of God, not a result of works, so that no one may boast.*” If you’ve given yourself even the slightest reason to boast, then you’ve contradicted the gospel of grace.

- ❖ **The only way to have a gospel where no one may boast – is to *not* look within yourself for the reason why you’re a Christian and someone else is not.** Instead, you resign that reason to the mysterious and sovereign will of God. Who we’re told, in **Ephesians 1:4**, chose us in Christ (he set his electing love on us through Christ) – not just before our birth – but before the foundation of the world.

- ❖ Let that sink in, if you’re a Christian. The God of all creation, in eternity past, before time began, before he flung the universe into existence, he thought of you. **He freely and graciously set his love upon you. He chose to love you.**
 - Not because he knew you'd be so lovely or lovable. **No, God chose to love you because he chose to love you.** I know that sounds like circular reasoning: I love you because I love you. It feels like a cop-out. Like you couldn't think of a reason.
 - But I guarantee that's the kind of love all of us want. That's electing love. It's the kind of love we're all looking for. **Nothing is more comforting or reassuring than a kind of love that has its own inner logic.**

- ❖ Husbands, let me give you a tip. If your wife ever asks you, "Why do you love me?" Think carefully before you start to rattle off a bunch of reasons. **Ask yourself what would be the most comforting and reassuring answer to that question.** I think any reason you give her that is grounded in some characteristic in her – could still lead her to doubt your love.
 - If you tell her it's because you're so smart, you're so funny, or you're caring, then there could always be those nagging questions in her mind: What if I change? What if I'm not as smart or funny or caring as I was before? What if he meets someone smarter, funnier, or more caring?

- ❖ **Brothers, the most comforting, reassuring answer you can give is to just tell her, “Honey, I love you because I love you. I choose to love you because I choose to love you.”** That's the kind of love we're all searching for.
 - And that's the kind of love to be found in Christ. **In the Christian faith, God loves you – *not* because you're so spiritual, *not* because you're so humble, *not* because you're such a good person. No, he loves you because he loves you.**

- ❖ I love what **Charles Spurgeon** had to say about this kind of electing love. When asked whether he believed in this idea of God freely choosing to set his love on people before they're born – before the foundation of the world – listen to Spurgeon's answer *“I believe the doctrine of election, because I am quite sure that if God had not chosen me I should never have chosen him; and I am sure he chose me before I was born, or else he never would have chosen me afterwards; and he must have elected me for reasons unknown to me, for I never could find any reason in myself why he should have looked upon me with special love.”*

Cherish God's Electing Love

- ❖ Amen. What a good word. That helps us understand God's electing love and its free, gracious, and mysterious nature. **But simply understanding this love is one thing – but cherishing God's electing love for yourself is far more important.** That leads to our second point. After explaining the origin of his ancient love for Israel, the LORD goes on to proclaim the fate of those whom he has not chosen to set his electing love. **A stark reminder of God's holy anger and his commitment to perfect justice will help the undeserving objects of his electing love to cherish that love even more.**
- ❖ Look back at vv3-4. So recall, that Israel is doubting God's love for them since their economy was still depressed, and yet Edom seemed to be on the road to recovery. **Which is infuriating considering how these ancient relatives had the gall to kick Israel when she was down and to profit off her defeat.** And yet listen to v3, *“but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.”* So the LORD reminds them that Edom didn't get off scot free. They too were defeated and displaced.
 - And even though they seem to be recovering, God is going to halt that progress. Listen to v4, *“If Edom says, “We are shattered but we will rebuild the ruins,” the LORD of hosts says, “They may build, but I will tear down, and they will be called ‘the wicked country,’ and ‘the people with whom the LORD is angry forever.’”*
- ❖ **The point is that a nation can exert all its effort to rebuild its ruins, but in the end, God is sovereign and determines whether that nation will be restored.** And it will not be so for Edom. It may appear that they're getting away with their ancient treachery and their unholy joy over Judah's defeat and Jerusalem's destruction. But here in v4, God reaffirms his commitment to love and justice.

- When they hear that God has not forgotten what Edom did to his people, to his treasured possession, and that the LORD will be forever angry with them – those who were growing spiritually apathetic and disillusioned with serving God are suddenly reassured that God’s ancient electing love for Jacob has not changed.

- ❖ His love for Israel has never wavered. It stays the same through the ages – even in seasons of despair, which are seasons of discipline. But even with this reassurance and recognition of God's electing love, there is no reason for Israel to gloat over Edom’s downfall or to boast in her status as God’s beloved. Hearing God say that Edom will be “*the people with whom the LORD is angry forever;*” should humble God’s people since we know that that’s what we deserve. **The LORD would be angry with us forever – but for the grace of God.**
 - If he had not – before the foundation of the world – freely, graciously, and mysteriously set his electing love on us, then we too would be a people with whom the LORD would be angry forever. We would deserve to be cast into the fires of hell to suffer the torments of eternal condemnation.

- ❖ **It’s this reminder of God’s absolute commitment to justice that helps his people to cherish the electing love that God has set on us.** We can rest assured that all wrongs, all injustices, all evil will be confronted with perfect justice in either one of two ways. Either judgment will fall on individual perpetrators of evil and justice will be carried out in the eternal fires of hell. Or judgment will fall on Christ the Redeemer and justice will have been carried out on his cross.
 - If you're a Christian but apathy is what you're dealing with right now, then you need to let those words in v4 sink in. They will be called the people with whom the LORD is angry forever. I hope those words are unsettling. I hope they bother you. Because *that* is what you and I deserve. **That is what you and I have been rescued from – because the Father set his electing love on us before even time began.**

- ❖ And in the fullness of time, he proved his love by sending his Beloved Son to live the life you were designed to live and die the death you deserved to die. And when the time was ripe, he put his Spirit in you to seal his love as a guarantee. So you can be sure you'll never lose it. **This kind of love from God – this electing love – needs to be understood by Christians, but more importantly, it needs to be cherished.**

Share God's Electing Love

- ❖ Now once we're able to understand and cherish God's electing love, then we're ready to fulfill the purpose of our election. Keep in mind that Israel was chosen from among the nations and blessed that she might be a blessing to all nations – that she might witness to the world the glory of the LORD and to share his love. **That's our third point – once you understand and cherish God's electing love, you're compelled to share it.**

- ❖ Look at v5. "*Your own eyes shall see this, and you shall say, "Great is the LORD beyond the border of Israel!"*" Notice the result when the Israelites start to see God's electing love over them and his rejection of Edom – all with their own eyes. They *don't* go on to say, "How great are we! How superior are we compared to the nations!" No, they go to say, "How great is the LORD among the nations!"
 - **Some criticize the doctrine of election by suggesting that telling someone that God specially chose you would boost your ego and foster a sense of superiority or exclusivity.** But according to v5, the opposite effect seems to happen. Learning of God's electing love doesn't seem to foster an insular mindset or exclusive thinking.

- ❖ Rather it seems to foster a global mindset. **Election reminds God's people that the LORD is not some kind of tribal god who only works for us.** The LORD is great beyond the border of Israel – great among the nations!
 - According to the OT, especially among the prophets, Israel's election as God's chosen people, his treasured possession, was never a grounds for boasting but a call to missions. **Election was never intended to compliment the chosen but rather to humble them and compel them to action.**

- ❖ **Christian, I hope you find great comfort and reassurance in knowing that you are God's chosen ones, holy and beloved.** But if God's electing love only serves to personally benefit you – to only encourage you or to stir you out of spiritual apathy – then I'm afraid you're missing the bigger picture and the bigger purpose behind your election.
 - **Once you realize how the God of the universe loves you freely, graciously, and mysteriously – the natural response should be, "Here I am, LORD. Send me. What would you have me do?"**
 - So what would he have you do? What is he calling you to do? How has he chosen you, called you, and set you apart for a task – to make his name great beyond the borders of your home, beyond the borders of our church?