

# Debate with God: A Question of Faithfulness

Malachi 2:10-16

John Tucker, Milford Baptist Church, 2 October 2005

## Introduction

One of the top rating shows on television at the moment is a series called *Desperate Housewives*. It's a drama about four beautiful and affluent women – Lynette, Susan, Bree and Gabrielle – who live in the seemingly perfect American suburb. But it turns out their lives are anything from perfect. Each episode is narrated by Mary Alice, one of their deceased friends. And from her elevated, all-seeing perspective, she gradually discloses some of the secrets hiding behind their closed doors. It turns out that only one of the four women enjoy anything close to what might resemble a healthy, faithful relationship. Of the other three, one was abandoned by her husband, one is currently being betrayed by her husband, and the other is, herself, cheating on her husband. The series is all about unfaithfulness. In that show breaking your promises, breaking your commitments, is presented as perfectly normal. I guess that's just a reflection on our culture. Whether it's marriage, business or politics – the bedroom, the boardroom, or the Beehive – faithfulness is in relatively short supply these days.

Well, it was no different in Malachi's day. A widespread failure to honour commitments was destroying the very fabric of Jewish society. In this passage Malachi addresses the issue. Malachi's name means 'messenger,' and as a messenger or prophet of God he outlines God's unique perspective on two kinds of unfaithfulness. This is one of the more difficult passages in the Bible to preach from. There's a message here for single people and a message for married people. There's a message for everyone. But it's not a comfortable message. Not a popular message. Having said that, if we take Malachi's message seriously this morning, it'll both safeguard our lives and transform our witness. So let's look at it.

## The question of intermarriage: who can I marry? (vv10-12)

In v 11 Malachi exposes the first way in which Israel is acting faithlessly: "A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves, by marrying the daughter of a foreign god." This is the problem of intermarriage. Jewish men were marrying women from other nations who worshipped idols. The Law of Moses strictly prohibited this kind of intermarriage with unbelievers (Ex 34:16; Deut 7:3–6). There's a similar warning in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians 6:14 Paul writes, "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers." Do not marry someone unless they love Jesus with all their heart. Now, for many single people this is an extremely sensitive issue. I've talked with wonderful Christians who want to get married but can't seem to find Mr or Mrs Right within the Christian community. And then they meet the perfect person. He's warm, loving, funny, intelligent, handsome, sympathetic to the faith ... but not a Christ-follower. They ask: "Is it wrong to get emotionally involved with him? Is it that wrong to marry him?" Malachi's answer is, "Yes." And in this passage he explains why.

First, he says, *it won't serve the interests of God's people*. In v 11 it says that this kind of intermarriage has "desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves." Generally, in the Old Testament, the "sanctuary" meant the temple in Jerusalem. But it could also refer to the people of Israel – God's chosen and holy nation among whom he dwelled and through whom he would reveal himself to the nations (Lev 26:11-12). That's the context here. Malachi is saying that marriage with pagan women was eroding the distinction between God's covenant people and the surrounding nations. It was diluting their witness as a people committed to God and his will. So the whole nation was suffering. God's sanctuary was being desecrated. In this sense, they were breaking faith not just with God, but with each other (v10). The same thing usually happens if you're a follower of Jesus and you marry someone who is isn't. Nine times out of ten, it will limit your ability to serve Christ's people. With divided loyalties, the chances are you'll be a passenger, not a worker. Now there are exceptions to that rule – glorious exceptions – but in most cases, when someone marries outside the family of God, it limits their ability to serve the family of God. And the whole family suffers. We think our faith is a private, individual matter. But our little compromises have huge repercussions for those around us. Do you know what caused the *Titanic* to sink? The most widely held theory was that the ship hit an iceberg, which opened a huge gash in the side of the liner. An international team of divers and scientists recently used sound waves to probe the wreckage buried in the mud under two and a half miles of water. Guess what they discovered? The damage was surprisingly small. Instead of a huge gash, they found six relatively narrow slits across the six watertight holds. Small damage can sink a great ship. A little compromise – getting involved emotionally with someone you know you shouldn't – can sink any chance of you giving your one and only life to the kingdom of God. The entire kingdom suffers.

But there's another reason against marrying outside the family of God. Verse 12: "As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD cut him off from the tents of Jacob – even though he brings offerings to the LORD Almighty." If marrying an unbeliever at best limits your ability to serve God's people, at worst *it*

*might cut you off from God's people altogether.* When I was seventeen I fell head over heels in love for the first time. She was beautiful, intelligent, witty, thoughtful. But she wasn't a believer. She was sympathetic to my faith, and I nearly convinced myself that that was sufficient. But it wasn't. I sensed where the relationship was leading: it was taking my heart away from Jesus. Teenagers, choose your friends wisely. Let's be honest, one of the main reasons – if not the main reason – why people fall away from Jesus is getting emotionally involved with an unbeliever. You may say, "I'll convert my unbelieving husband or my wife," and that can in some rare cases happen. But the odds are on you being lost to God forever. Even King Solomon, with all his wisdom, lost his faith in God because he married women who worshiped other gods and they "turned his heart away" (1 Kings 11:1-8). But let's be clear. This passage is not saying that if you are married to someone who is not a follower of Jesus you should get out. In 1 Corinthians 7:12-13 Paul says, "If you're already there, stay there. Don't pull out." What the text is saying is that if the choice of a marriage partner still lies before you, settle in your mind right now that you will never marry anyone who does not love the Lord Jesus with all their heart.

### **The question of broken marriage: when can I leave? (vv13-16)**

This passage doesn't just speak to single people. Having addressed the issue of intermarriage, Malachi goes on in the second half to focus on the issue of broken marriage. Look at v 13: "Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer pays attention to your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands." Malachi's compatriots are crying out to God because – as we read in the next chapter – locusts and droughts are destroying their crops (3:11). But their emotional prayer meetings are making no difference. "Why are you ignoring our prayers?" they cry. "Why are you so distant?" And Malachi's answer is: "Look at your marriages. You've broken faith with 'the wife of your youth'." The suggestion is that Malachi is addressing older men who have been married for some years. He's saying, "Your wife has given you the best years of her life. She's been your friend, your lover, your companion, as she promised. And now that she is no longer the young attractive woman you married, you swap her for some exotic young Canaanite girl with nice skin. It's outrageous." It reminds me of the story I heard about two men who were talking. The first man says, "I got this poodle for my wife." And the other one says, "Sure wish I could trade mine in for something like that." These men were just trading in their elderly wives for newer models. They were treating divorce lightly. Sometimes we can do the same today, can't we? But in this passage Malachi gives three reasons why divorce should never be entered into lightly.

Firstly, *marriage is a covenant between you and God.* Verse 14 says that if you're married, God was there as a witness when you spoke your marriage vows. Marriage is not just a piece of legal paper. It's a covenant ordained and protected by God. We often think we can divide life into different airtight compartments: my faith and prayer life over here, and my work or my marriage over there. But they're connected. How we treat those closest to us – whether we honour our word – will affect how we relate to God.

Secondly, *marriage is the foundation for families where God's way of life can be practiced and learned.* Look at v 15: God made husbands and wives one in flesh and spirit – he ordained marriage – because "he was seeking godly offspring." He wants families to be places where promises are not broken but kept, where children learn through their parents that God is faithful and good, and that his way is best. When I reflect on why I chose to follow Jesus, the reason is quite simple: My parents, and the way they lived at home. They demonstrated the reality of their faith, they embodied the goodness of the God they taught me about, through their loving commitment to each other.

Then a third reason to not take divorce lightly: *A difficult marriage is better than a destructive divorce.* Verse 16: "'I hate divorce,' says the LORD God of Israel, 'and I hate a man's covering himself [or his wife] with violence as well as with his garment,'" says the LORD Almighty.' The word translated "violence" in this verse comes from the original word "hamas." Ring any bells? Heard of the terrorist organisation called *Hamas*? It's committed to violence and destruction. God hates divorce because it's so violently destructive for the people involved. For adults, divorce carries the pain of bereavement. (Research shows that divorced men and women are more depressed more anxious, and more insecure than married people.) But children are often hit the hardest by divorce. This is how the head of a children's psychiatric unit described the trauma: "For a child, divorce is the explosion of his world. It is equivalent to the devastating effects of Hiroshima or Nagasaki. The scale is different, but the impact is similar." So, as a rule, it is better to persevere with a difficult marriage than to settle for a destructive divorce.

But there are exceptions (Deut 24:1-6; Matt 19:1-2). Jesus said that where there's been "marital unfaithfulness," when a relationship has turned septic and destructive for the people involved, divorce is permissible. I remember hearing a lady who had been divorced say: "My marriage was a mess. My husband was abusive. My children were getting hurt. Still, I hung in there because I remembered God said that he hates divorce. But then one day God said to me, 'I love people more than I hate divorce.' And I realised that

divorce is sometimes the lesser evil." I think she was right. God hates divorce because it hurts people, and he loves us too much to see us hurt. The fact is that people who have been divorced or separated have already endured enormous pain. The last thing they need is more rejection from the church. My prayer is that we would be a community where people who experience divorce know beyond a shadow of a doubt they are loved and accepted. Because divorce hurts enough.

## Conclusion

That's why this passage concludes with the command, "So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith." Or, as some translations say, "So watch yourself. Don't let your guard down." Don't think, "It couldn't happen to me." It could. Keep investing in your relationships. I once heard a wise old man give some really good advice on that score. We'll finish with this. Four tips for maintaining strong marriages.

1. **Walk hand in hand.** Be serious about having fun. If there were more courting in marriage, they'd be fewer marriages in court.
2. **Look eye to eye.** In June this year Percy Arrowsmith (105) and his 100-year-old wife, Florence, celebrated their 80<sup>th</sup> wedding anniversary. According to the *Guinness Book of Records* they hold the record for the longest lasting marriage. When the Arrowsmiths were asked the key to their long marriage, do you know what they said? "Never go to sleep on an argument. Every night before going to bed we hold hands and kiss each other – look eye to eye."
3. **Talk face to face.** Spend time communicating. According to *Newsweek Magazine* the average couple spends only four minutes a day talking to each other.
4. **Kneel side by side.** A recent survey found that both Christian and non-Christian marriages are failing at around the same rate (50%). But when a couple prays together, the divorce rate plummets to less than one percent. Nothing is better for a marriage than a common commitment to Christ.

Along with these principles, Malachi would add one other. In your own spirit, rule out unfaithfulness as an option. Lock the escape hatch and say, "I will keep my promise to you, come what may." I heard this week about a man who, with his one son, had to bury his wife in the most tragic of circumstances. She'd committed suicide after twenty years of desperate mental illness. Her husband had stood by her side all that time. When he was asked, "How did you do it?" he simply said, "I'd given my word. I'd made a vow."

## Questions

1. Paul Simon once wrote a song called, *Fifty Ways to Leave Your Lover*. On a scale of 1 to 10, where would you rank our society when it comes to faithfulness?
2. Are you a "promise-keeper"? How would you rate on a scale of 1 to 10?
3. Read Malachi 2:10-12. What is God's view on marrying non-Christians? Can you identify from this text two reasons why he discourages it?
4. In ancient Israel people were married extremely young. (According to the Talmud, a young man was cursed if he was not married by the age of twenty.) When people marry young today, it's not uncommon for divorce to occur. What would be Malachi's advice to a couple thinking about divorce?
5. It's been said that Christian marriage is a "sacrament." What do you think that means, and what are the implications for how we – if we're married – should relate to our spouses? See Eph 5:22-33.
6. C.S. Lewis said, "Being in love is a good thing, but it is not the best thing ... Love ... is a deep unity maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habits reinforced by the grace which both partners ask and receive from God ... On this love the engine of marriage is run; being in love was the explosion that started it." What practical steps can you take this week to strengthen by habit your closest relationships?
7. When Jesus instituted the sacrament known as communion, he said, "This cup is the new covenant in my blood" (1 Cor 11:25). What do you think he meant by that? What is the new covenant?