



# Is My Worship Empty?

Sermon - Steve Stanis

Malachi 1:6-14 7 May 2023

Hebrews 10:19-25, Mark 12:28-33

## Prayer:

Lord, as we come to church to worship you, we are reminded that it is the Spirit who makes our worship effective. And so we pray that the meditations of our hearts, and the words on my lips, will be pleasing in your sight. May we be doers of your Word, and not hearers only, we pray in Christ's name... Amen.

## Introduction:

Who watched the coronation last night? Who loved it?  
Or was watching it a sacrifice for you?

The reason I ask has a numeric purpose. The book of Malachi reminds us that the Jews were returning from exile after being away for 70 years. Charles' 'exile', waiting to become King, is finally fulfilled after how long a wait? ... 70 years!

Were you just going through the motions last night? Did it leave you empty? Many of us can feel empty inside at different times and for different reasons, in our lives. This is how the Israelites were feeling on their return from exile.

Today Malachi is challenging the emptiness of the Israelite people, urging them to grapple with their internal righteousness as the pure sacrifice to God.

Verses 6-14 are an extraordinary statement from the prophet Malachi to the people who are in rebellion.

In verse 6 God confirms his love for his people and yet we see, in verses 7-14, the Israelites don't return this love as God has called them to. They have begun to return from Babylon. They should be ecstatic; God is fulfilling his Covenant.

Instead, as we heard last week, they are disgruntled. Remember in verse 3, the people ask God how he has shown his love for them?

Before the Exile happens, there are promises of how the Israelites are going to return to their land. It is foretold that God will be faithful to bring them back. It is as if the golden age of Israel will begin again. They will be the centre of geographical and political authority. The Jews, who have been scattered throughout the Mediterranean world, will be permitted to return. All people will then acknowledge that Yahweh, Israel's God, is the true God.

Unfortunately, even though the Israelites are coming back, this is not what they are experiencing. The Temple has been finished (that is clear because the people are offering sacrifices) but where are the crowds from all nations flocking towards it? Zechariah had promised this would happen...

*Chapter 8:22 And many peoples and powerful nations will come to Jerusalem to seek the LORD Almighty and to entreat him.*

What had happened to the shaking of the nations that occurred in the book of Haggai?

*Chapter 2:7 "I will shake all nations, and what is desired by all nations will come, and I will fill this house with glory," says the LORD Almighty.*

In fact, Jerusalem was still, largely, an uninhabited ruin... in today's language - a refugee camp. Instead of the position of importance and wealth they had expected... they believed they were promised... they felt abandoned and unloved by God. There was a challenge in the minds of the Israelite people between what they believed to be God's promises and what they were actually experiencing. Faith and life felt empty and second rate. It was not turning out the way they had expected, and they were becoming disillusioned.

Has that happened to you? Has life turned out the way you expected or are you feeling disillusioned?

Malachi is calling the people to recognise this innate challenge. Listen to verse 9:

*"Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?" says the Lord Almighty.*

The Israelite people have lost the impetus to do this. They have become careless. They are going through the motions.

This is the problem that Malachi addresses, initially among the priests in the Temple in Jerusalem but really to the hearts of all Israelites. They are bringing to the Lord animals that are not fit. Leviticus makes it clear what animals are fit for the Almighty God. It is clear they are not following the regulations; they are not getting it right. In today's terms, they are bringing road-kill to sacrifice to God.

The Israelites had lost their way. They didn't care about ritual conformity, let alone internal righteousness that is required to be faithful to God.

Love and service have always been required by God. This does not change when Jesus comes. God has always required righteousness that is inside and out.

Malachi says to lift up your eyes and open up your hearts. See who this God is, the God you are supposed to be loving and serving. Verse 11 says:

*"My name will be great among the nations, from where the sun rises to where it sets. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to me, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.*

This is a remarkable promise that, already, other nations of the world are starting to worship him. Other nations were known to be idolatrous; they were following other gods. Nevertheless, Malachi says that God knows, right there, out among the other nations, there are people reaching out to find him.

This is the generous view of a God to all nations that we see glimpses of in the Old Testament; it is clearly reaffirmed by Jesus. It struck me that the teaching in Matthew 22:1-14 from my last sermon two weeks ago is speaking the same message. All are invited to the King's banquet for his son. Jew and Gentile. Just as the sun rises and sets, so the promise of God has always been to gather his people for eternity.

Malachi is contrasting the people who are supposed to be close to God, the priesthood, with those from other nations whose hearts are turning to him. The Israelite priesthood, of all people, are supposed to know how to serve him and worship him. And yet their hearts are empty and their sacrifices are not worthy. Malachi is pointing out there are people with none of their training, background and history, but who know and

are seeking after the God of Heaven. These people put the efforts of the priesthood to shame.

Verse 14 reminds us of the challenge

*"For I am a **great** king," says the LORD Almighty, "and my name is to be **reverenced** among the nations."*

The nations know there is a God of Heaven and Earth and he is the one we really ought to be worshipping.

The clear message for us is that we must be careful, lest we lapse back into carelessness and casual service, not really bothering how we worship, how we pray, or how we study Scripture, let alone how we live in the world. Is our internal righteousness before God directing our sacrifices to God? What do our sacrifices reveal about our faith in God?

This is a timely reminder that God is to be honoured and glorified. It is too easy to make the same mistakes the priests were making in Malachi's time. We need to consciously lift up our eyes and say, "God's name is to be honoured." He calls us to him and into his service.

Remember Romans tells us that our sacrifice is our very lives. Listen to the exhortation of Romans 12:1

*Therefore, I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God's mercy, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God—this is your true and proper worship.*

This is true worship! I am not just talking about our actions... what we do. The actions of the Israelites in offering poor sacrifices reflected their hearts. Their action testified to a hardened heart that did not seek God or worship him.

When we are talking about true worship, when we are talking about being motivated by the love of God, we must honour God with sincere action that comes from a pure heart.

Remember the challenge... With all the right intentions, it is so easy to be distracted. God requires an unblemished, pure sacrifice.

And so Malachi is moving prophecies forward to the time of the New Testament. Malachi is the last book of the Old Testament. It is only 400 years until Jesus comes... Jesus, the one unblemished sacrifice who will right our relationship with God. We cannot fix the problem of sin. It is God who offers his Son as the unblemished, pure sacrifice on our behalf.

In our emptiness, God is faithful, showing the depth of his love. We cannot fix the challenge between wanting to honour God, yet so regularly missing the mark. We rely on the mercy of God and the grace of God.

Just as God exhorted the Israelites through Malachi, so God exhorts us in the passage chosen from Hebrews to find encouragement and hope as we seek to honour God, claiming the internal righteousness that can only come from Christ. The passage from Hebrews is a lifestyle of faith. Christ saved us to worship God with all our life. This passage is a road map of how to do it.

Can you hear Corinthians 13:13 in this passage from Hebrews 10:22-24?

*And now these three remain: faith, hope and love.  
But the greatest of these is love.*

## **Firstly, faith**

*...let us draw near to God with a sincere heart and with the full assurance that **faith** brings... (v22)*

Together we have confidence to draw near to God.

Our confidence to draw near is not based upon what we've done or not done but upon what Christ has done through the shedding of his own blood. Our confidence is based upon the work of Christ. This is true worship. Let's be prayerful as we confidently draw near to God.

## **Secondly, hope**

Let us hold unswervingly to the **hope** we profess, for he who promised is faithful. (v23)

God is a covenant God. God is a promise keeper. His grace is our hope for his eternal kingdom, on earth as it is in heaven. It is in the resurrection that we find our hope, our mission, and our love. It is the event above all that calls us to worship God the creator, the life-giver, as he transforms us by his Spirit.

## **And thirdly, love**

*...spur one another on toward **love**... (v24)*

Let us stir up one another's minds to energetic effort in love. One another... we are in this together! The vision of connecting with each other is so important as we love each other and as we share the love of God with our world.

Did you hear our Vision: We are prayerful, connecting and being transformed by Jesus. Love and service is the language Jesus spoke and so we are called to speak it too. It is the

unblemished, pure love and service of Jesus that we receive and that we are to channel.

Today we have been reminded of Malachi's challenge to the Israelite people to grapple with their internal righteousness as the pure sacrifice to God. This passage in Malachi is equally challenging us to grapple with our hearts as we love and serve Jesus together.

Our love and service is our sacrifice to God.

1) Give God your best, always and every way you can.

This starts in your heart and radiates out.

This is true love and service.

2) Seek God first, not as a second-rate afterthought.

Never give God the discards of your faith and life.

3) Don't measure your sacrifice. God requires a pure heart.

Let's start now... this week! Let's glorify God, making Jesus known, as we love and serve together.

