

This section of Malachi is about unfaithfulness to God. 5 times in these verses the word unfaithful is used about the Israelites. They're not a great example are they? Remember last week we saw they were half-hearted in their service of God. They gave God a bit of attention but only the scraps of their time, energy and money. They basically thought of God as a bit mean; he put great burdens on them, his people. Their half-heartedness led to their unfaithfulness. They thought God didn't care about them so they wouldn't care about God.

There is a direct link between half-heartedness and unfaithfulness. If someone is half-hearted towards God they will soon become unfaithful to him. And the flip is true, if some is unfaithful to God they will soon become half-hearted towards him. As part of God's family we should be wholehearted and faithful. Not to try and make God happy, or to try and qualify ourselves to be part of God's family. We should try and live like this because we're already part of the family. We live like this to display our true family likeness.

God, our Father, is the great example of this. He is utterly and completely wholehearted in his love for us. And he is utterly and completely faithful to us. When God makes a covenant he always keeps it. A covenant is a promise between two people. And in the covenant God makes with us he is 100% faithful. Even when we are half-hearted and unfaithful, he remains wholehearted and faithful.

So, to display our family likeness, we should be like that too. But, the Israelites, in Malachi's day, had fallen a long way short of this. Look down at verse 10 and see Malachi's accusation; "Do we not all have one Father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?" They have God as their Father, they were made by God. They belong to him. And yet, they show they're unfaithful to God, which is profaning the covenant of our ancestors, by breaking faith with one another. They messed up their vertical relationship with God, by messing up their horizontal relationships with each other.

The Bible repeatedly makes it clear that what we do reveals what we think about God. Jesus said "everyone will know you are my disciples if you love one another." Faithfulness to God is shown by faithfulness to one another. And particularly, in this passage, faithfulness to God is shown by our attitude to marriage.

1. The Israelites were unfaithful to God by marrying non-believers (11-12)

God wanted his people to be faithful to Him. But they showed they didn't really care about God by ignoring what He wanted and going off and marrying pagan wives. Look at verse 11, "Judah has been unfaithful. A detestable thing has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem: Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the LORD loves by marrying women who worship a foreign god."

And let's be very clear this isn't a racist policy. The problem wasn't that they were marrying foreigners. The issue wasn't based on racial purity; the issue was spiritual purity. The issue was that these women were daughters of a foreign god. They were followers of a different god. They were not believers in the one true God. The Israelites were marrying non-believers.

In the book of Ezra, written about the same time as Malachi, we get more detail about what was happening. The Israelites looked at the people around them and liked what they saw. They were attracted by it. They were trying to assimilate themselves into the culture around them. They didn't want to be different; to be set apart as God's people. If they integrated with the cultures that surrounded them they'd be more acceptable. Yes, they'd carry on sacrificing at the temple, but they'd also keep the neighbours onside.

It doesn't happen like that. You cannot serve the one true God and something else; that's idolatry. Throughout Israel's history, when they'd married followers of false gods, they themselves turned away from the one true God. It happened time and time again. But they'd not learnt. Look at verse 12 and see the consequences of this unfaithfulness, "As for the man who does this, whoever he may be, may the LORD remove him from the tents of Jacob-- even though he brings an offering to the LORD Almighty." God says what they were doing was detestable, it was desecrating the sanctuary. They had broken faith with God. Because of that they should be removed from God's family, removed from the community, that's what "remove him from the tents of Jacob" means.

Now the direct and obvious application to us, as the New Testament people of God, is this: do not be unfaithful to God and marry non-Christians. There are lots of places to go in the Bible but we'll just look at one verse, **1 Corinthians 7:39** "A woman is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to marry anyone she wishes, but he must belong to the Lord." Belonging to the Lord, means the spouse must be a Christian.

Marrying a non-believer is a dangerous thing to do. Normally what happens is that your heart is turned away from God. How can a spouse really accept that they are not your primary focus, number 1 priority, unless they share that same focus? For a Christian couple, both should prioritise serving God before they serve their spouse. And a healthy marriage is one where the couple encourage each other to put God first. Imagine the strain when that isn't the case. Each week you go off to church and your partner begrudges time you spend away from them. The temptation is to stop being as regular at church. You'll go one week and then have a week at home. Over time the frequency drops and you may find you've turned away from God.

And for those of us here, whose partner isn't a Christian, they need a lot of support and

encouragement from the rest of us to keep going as a Christian. It's hard at times to keep going when your spouse is a Christian; it's much harder when they're not. So, care, encourage and pray for those whose partner doesn't share their faith.

But what about those of us who aren't married. For some the desire to have a spouse is a massive burden. The desire for love, companionship, stability and a family are good things. But, please hear this, marriage will not make you more fulfilled in Christ than you already are. Please don't follow the example of the Israelites and think that marrying an unbeliever won't affect your relationship with God. Unless you can find a fellow believer to marry, the only sensible option is to stay single. Marrying a non-believer will harm your relationship with Christ. Don't risk that; marriage isn't worth it.

For the teenagers, marriage is probably many years away. But, at some point, most of you will get married. When you get to that stage of life, listen to what God says about the choice of a spouse. They must be a Christian.

But who we should marry isn't the key application of these verses. Think about the reason the Israelites were running off with pagan wives. They did this because they wanted to conform to the society around them. They wanted to assimilate with the other cultures so they wouldn't stand out and face opposition. They wanted an easy life. Yes of course they wanted to continue as part of God's people, but they wanted to do it on their terms where they wouldn't face opposition.

Now that's a temptation we all face. None of us really want to look different. None of us really want to face opposition for our faith. Wouldn't life be much better if we could fit in with the culture around us and keep God happy at the same time? The Israelites believed they could do that. They were wrong. To serve God faithfully is counter-cultural. To be part of God's people, to be a follower of Christ, is to be different from the culture around us.

Do not break faith with God by believing the lie that integrating with our culture is danger free. Yes, we live in the culture, we're explicitly told not to separate ourselves from the culture. But, as we do that, remember the prevailing culture is opposed to God.

2. The Israelites were unfaithful to God by divorcing their first wives (13-16a)

Through disregarding the promises they made to their wives, they show they're disregarding the promises they made to God. Their attitude to their wives reflects their attitude to God. Divorce is not good for a number of reasons, but the reason God highlights it here is because it shows how the people have broken faith with Him.

Presumably they'd rejected their first wives to marry unbelievers. Their selfish desire to assimilate into the culture around them had led them to be unfaithful to their wife. "You're no longer good enough for me; I want a newer exciting foreign model." They'd broken faith with their community. "I'm going to bring in non-believers into our community and desecrate the temple, I don't care, I want an easy life." And, of course, they'd broken faith with God. "Serving you faithfully isn't enough; I want to be able to serve you and other gods."

Look at verse 13, "Another thing you do: You flood the LORD's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favour on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. ¹⁴ You ask, "Why?" It is because the LORD is the witness between you and the wife of your youth. You have been unfaithful to her, though she is your partner, the wife of your marriage covenant."

As I said divorce isn't the main point of these verses; the main point is about unfaithfulness to God. But, with such a direct reference I think it's important to spend a moment addressing divorce. There are 2 main views on what the bible says about marriage and divorce. Either it's like baking a cake, or building a house. Let me explain. The historically most popular view is that marriage is like baking a cake. You mix all the ingredients together and when they're cooked it's impossible to separate them back to what they once were. That's known as the indissolubist view. In that view divorce and remarriage are never permitted.

The view I think most closely reflects what the bible teaches is the build a house idea. To build a house well takes effort and attention. This reminds us we need to work hard to build our marriages. However, it's possible to deconstruct a house. It takes stress and hard work and there's a lot of damage involved, but it's possible. Applying that to divorce and remarriage, I think the bible allows for a few circumstances in which divorce is permitted. Adultery and desertion for instance. And in those circumstances divorce is permitted. Now there is of course much, much more to say on this and do ask me after if you wish to.

For those of us here who've been divorced it's really important to say that you are fully part of God's family. Being divorced doesn't disqualify you. God is a God of forgiveness and mercy. God's love and salvation is much bigger than whatever has happened in your past. The question for you, as for all of us, is; are you serving God wholeheartedly and faithfully today?

All of us, as faithful Christians, should strive to uphold, support and encourage marriages. Those of us who are married we need to work hard building our marriages. We need to remain faithful to the promises that we made. If we reject those promises, surely that goes some way to showing what we think about God's promises to us. If we are unfaithful to our spouse, surely it reflects our

unfaithfulness to God.

More than that, the God who made us, saved us and loves us, wants godly marriages. Why? So he can have godly offspring, so his family would be godly. So his family would reflect it's true identity as his people. God is very concerned about our marriages because he is very concerned about his family. Look at verse 15, "Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring. So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful to the wife of your youth."

Do not be unfaithful. Don't spurn faithful service to him by wanting to assimilate into our culture. Don't feel you're bored with God and want something new and seemingly more exciting. That's what the Israelites were doing when they divorced their first wives. The most wonderful privilege in this whole world is being part of God's people. Don't reject that. Don't look for excitement elsewhere. Remain faithful to God.

That's exactly the exhortation at the end of these verses. **"So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful." (16b)**

Be aware of the temptation to sin. Guard yourself. Be aware of the temptation to reject faithfulness to God and to conform to the world around us. Guard yourself. Watch out. Don't let your sinful nature lie to you and say that God won't mind, it doesn't matter. That is a lie.

We've all, at various points in our lives, been unfaithful to God, we've not served him wholeheartedly. In fact all of us, every day, fall short of matching the ideal that God sets before us. The Bible describes even our best work as like filthy rags. But, God is faithful. He keeps his promise even when we don't keep ours. The theme of this book is a call to return to God, that is to repent and turn back to following God. Malachi 3:7, "Ever since the time of your ancestors you have turned away from my decrees and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you," says the LORD Almighty"

What God wants us to have is the best life. The best life for us is to wholeheartedly and faithfully follow God.

So be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.

Let's pray!