

WHY DOES YOUR ATTITUDE MATTER TO GOD?

MALACHI 4

How many of you have ever watched the old TV sitcom “Leave It To Beaver”? Now, we’re really dating ourselves, aren’t we? In one of the episodes, Wally and the Beaver (who are brothers) are going out to see a movie with their friend, Eddie. Mrs. Cleaver – Wally and the Beaver’s mother – has agreed to let them see “Pinocchio” but not the movie they really want to see – “Voodoo Curse.” As they approach the theater, Eddie suggests a solution to their dilemma. “Wally, your mom told you not to take the Beaver to ‘Voodoo Curse’, right? But what if the Beaver took you?” All three of them considered this to be a marvelous and ingenious solution. Off they go to see “Voodoo Curse” instead. All of us understand that kind of thought process. It’s called rationalizing. Rationalization is finding an acceptable way to simply do something you know you shouldn’t do or not do something you know you should do.

Rationalization can happen in your relationship with God. It was happening to the people of Israel in their relationship with God during the ministry of the Old Testament prophet, Malachi. What do we know about Malachi? Not much. That might not even be the prophet’s real name because “malachi” literally means “my messenger.” The best evidence points to the probability that he prophesied some 450 years before Jesus was born. Malachi ministered at a time after God’s people had returned from seventy years of exile in the city and region of Babylon.

That experience – exile in Babylon for seventy years – forever cured the Jewish people of overt idolatry. So there was no longer a problem with the Israelites worshipping images of wood, stone or metal. But the absence of idolatry didn’t necessarily mean that the hearts of the Jewish people were on fire for God. Quite the contrary. They had developed a kind of skeptical, indifferent attitude towards the Lord. Yes, God was there and, yes, He was important to a degree. But there was something definitely lacking in the Jewish people’s love for God, obedience of God and service to God. Priests taught, sacrifices were offered up, the people sang psalms and all that, but underneath the religious façade was a kind of casual, convenient and all too comfortable attitude towards God.

Malachi addressed that kind of aloof attitude and approach to God head on. It would be easy to dismiss his message as irrelevant to you. But there’s a kind of timelessness to what God says through Malachi that you need to hear and heed. Unfortunately, it’s actually easy for you and me to slide into the same kind of attitude towards God as the Israelites in Malachi’s day and time. Here’s the first of two simple but important truths gleaned from God’s words through Malachi:

YOU CAN OFFEND GOD.

Malachi had a unique way of expressing himself. He records his prophecy as a kind of back and forth debate between God and the Jewish people. The Lord challenges a sinful behavior or attitude and the people respond back with a

question or a comment. Then the Lord answers back yet again. Back and forth it goes like an actual conversation. Malachi gets very specific about some behaviors that indicate an attitude towards God that's flat out wrong.

For instance, the people were bringing unworthy gifts of cattle and sheep to be sacrificed at the temple in Jerusalem. Animal sacrifice was a very important part of worshipping God in Old Testament times. But in Malachi 1, you read that the people were bringing diseased, maimed and otherwise imperfect animals. The Law of Moses had made it very clear that only the best cattle and sheep were to be presented for sacrifice certainly not the worst of the herd or flock. God was trying to teach His people to only offer Him the best. But by bringing the worst, the people were revealing only too clearly what they really thought about God. It was rationalization. Yes, they brought a sacrifice but it wasn't the right kind of sacrifice. It's like the young boy who was at church one Sunday years ago out in a rural community. This was when people sometimes liked to provide their pastor with gifts of fresh produce or farm animals as payment for his services. Anyway, this boy greeted his pastor at the door of the church, looked up at him and said, "Pastor, we were going to bring you a chicken for dinner, but it got well." That's what was happening in Malachi's day.

Do you see the principle here? Whatever you give to the Lord and whatever you do for the Lord ought to be your very best. Excellence is never about perfection. It's about giving God the very best you can give to Him at all times. Sadly, you can give God second best or the leftovers instead of your very best. When you gather for worship here on Sundays, are you giving God your best? Do you express your gratitude fully? Do you enter into the experience of worship with full heart and soul? Or is coming to church just a habit, just a duty? When you serve Jesus in some way either through this church or out in the community, are you giving the best of your discretionary time and energy? If you accept a responsibility, do you then do it half-heartedly or whole-heartedly? When you offer God less than your very best whether it's your time, your talent, your efforts, you offend Him. Your attitude matters to God.

Giving their offerings. That was another area where the Jewish people were offending God. If you grew up in a church, you've probably heard a message on Malachi 3. There God actually accuses the Jewish people of robbing Him of the money that He should have received in the giving of their tithes and offerings. They were guilty yet again of rationalization. Yes, they were giving something, but they weren't giving what they were supposed to give to the Lord: the tithe. A tithe is 10% of your income. They assumed that God should be satisfied with whatever they want to give to Him. They were wrong. God was anything but pleased. In fact, He was deeply offended.

One of the greatest indicators of where you are in your relationship with God is what you put in the offering plate. If you really believe that God's doesn't care what you give as long as you give something to the work of His Kingdom – that

anything you give is acceptable to Him - you don't know God. That's rationalization. God is smarter than that. He knows only too well that where a person's treasure is located is where his or her heart is also. You can rationalize giving less than 10% of your income to the Lord's work. You can think up countless excuses why you can't afford to tithe. You can ask God to bless you financially while you disobey Him when it comes to the tithe. You can fool yourself. But you can't fool God. When you give less than the tithe, you offend God. Many of you here today are faithful tithers or you give beyond the tithe. God bless you! You're the reason this church can pay its bills and do its ministry. Personally and individually, how's it going in this area of your relationship with God? Are you tithing or are you rationalizing why you can't tithe? You're doing one or the other. Your attitude matters to God.

What was wrong with God's people back in Malachi's day? The same thing that can be wrong with God's people today! Pride. Arrogance. Pride is what you use to keep God at arm's length. When a person says, "No, I don't need Jesus dying for me on a cross. I can get to Heaven through my own efforts or beliefs." – that's a fundamental expression of pride. But just because you're a follower of Jesus doesn't mean you're immune to pride. When you start trying to live your everyday life without God's input and influence, that's pride, too. When you slowly but surely push God out to the margins – the fringes – of your life instead of keeping Him central, that's pride, too. Worship becomes increasingly optional. The Bible becomes increasingly irrelevant. Life becomes increasingly like a treadmill that revolves around getting ahead, getting what you want, and just trying to enjoy stuff until you retire or die. Pride isn't so much forgetting about God entirely. Pride is more often about just living as if God doesn't matter.

Jose Cubero was one of Spain's most brilliant, gifted matadors. By the age of 21, he'd already enjoyed a spectacular career. But one day, he made a tragic mistake in the ring. He thrust his sword a final time into a bleeding, delirious bull which then collapsed. Because he thought the fight was over, Cubero turned to the crowd to acknowledge their applause. But the bull was not dead. It got up and lunged at Cubero. One of its horns pierced his back and punctured his heart. "This bull has killed me," Jose Cubero said before he lost consciousness and died. Just when you think you've finished off pride and you turn to accept the congratulations of others or yourself, pride will stab you in the back. You should never consider pride to be dead before you are.

Ultimately, pride is rejecting God – that's why it offends Him so greatly. This is what God's people were doing in Malachi's day. It can happen to you and me, too. Let's read Malachi 4 just now. Right there in v. 1, God says what He will do to everyone and anyone who is arrogant before Him. There are some dreadfully eternal consequences to human pride. First, God's judgment is certain, "Surely the day is coming..." It did come for the nation of Israel some forty years after Jesus rose from the dead when Rome sacked Jerusalem and burned it to the ground in 70 AD. There have been many "days of the Lord" down through

history – demonstrations of supernatural power both to save and to judge. There is also coming a great and final Day of the Lord when final judgment will be rendered. God doesn't lie. Judgment is certain.

Second, God's judgment is comprehensive – "... "Not a root or a branch will be left to them."

 God's judgment is more like an all consuming furnace than a gentle, warming fire. God's judgment "... 'will burn like a furnace'" says Malachi. Have you ever visited a steel mill where they utilize those enormous blast furnaces to forge metal? I can still recall as a child visiting the Ford plant in Detroit and going through a steel mill where they made metal for the cars. I can still remember the incredible heat from those furnaces as I walked over them on a catwalk way up high near the roof of that plant. You may not like the idea of God's judgment, the existence of hell or the doctrine of eternal damnation, but the Bible teaches the fact of God's judgment nonetheless.

Don't miss the Bible's warnings, people of God! Your attitude matters to Him! Yes, I believe in the eternal security of the believer because the only alternative is eternal insecurity. But don't you dare allow yourself to become like the people of God in Malachi's day. Don't give yourself permission to live a sloppy, half-hearted and disobedient life before God. Don't offer God less than your very best and expect Him to be grateful. Don't allow a cold, hard and distant relationship to develop between you and your Heavenly Father. God finds all of that deeply offensive and He can and will bring judgment upon your life. If He judged His people back in the Old Testament, why won't He judge you, too? It's true, you can offend God. But, remember, here's a wonderful alternative:

YOU CAN PLEASE GOD.

What does that mean? It doesn't mean that you have the ability to impress God so much that He gives you eternal life as some kind of reward. Eternal life is forever an unmerited gift of God to you not a reward you earn or deserve. By pleasing God, the Bible means that you have the ability to bring God pleasure by the way you live, the way you treat others and the way you interact with Him. You actually have the capacity through the Holy Spirit who lives within you to make God's heart glad. Malachi 4 suggests several ways you can please God.

First of all, you please God when you give Him your heart. "Look, I am sending you the prophet Elijah before the great and dreadful day of the LORD arrives. His preaching will turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers. Otherwise I will come and strike the land with a curse." (Mal 4:5-6 NLT) That's a prophecy that was actually fulfilled in the person and ministry of John the Baptist. He was the man who acted as a kind of forerunner and preparer of people's hearts for the ministry of Jesus. In the New Testament, the Bible says this about John the Baptist, "He will be a man with the spirit and power of Elijah. He will prepare the people for the coming of the Lord. He will turn

the hearts of the fathers to their children, and he will cause those who are rebellious to accept the wisdom of the godly.” (Luke 1:17 NLT)

What does that phrase mean - “turn the hearts of fathers to their children, and the hearts of children to their fathers”? Was John the Baptist’s ministry supposed to settle disputes in the family or restore peace between parents and children? No, the big problem in Malachi’s day and the big problem some 450 years later in John the Baptist’s day was a deep, inner and spiritual separation of the people’s hearts from God Himself. “Fathers” referred to the ancestors of the Jewish people in the past who had demonstrated a heart for God: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses, Joshua and David. Were they perfect people? Hardly! But they loved God deeply. That kind of love was sorely missing in the lives of their descendants – the “children.” That’s what God wanted to see again in Malachi’s day. That’s also what He wanted to see as a result of John the Baptist’s ministry before Jesus began to teach, preach and heal. Love for God!

That’s also what He still wants to see in you and me today. God wants people who are in love with Him! God wants His people to have hearts that are soft towards Him and warm to the Holy Spirit’s direction. You can become hard, cold and legalistic in your attitude towards God. You can also become sloppy, indulgent and careless just giving lip service to God. Your life reveals no desire to be gradually but definitely transformed by God’s will and ways. The end result is what happened to the people in Malachi’s day: you get distant in your relationship with God. Above all and in all, God wants your heart, your love and your deepest self. Have you ever truly given God your heart?

Second, you please God when you obey Him. God says through Malachi, “Remember to obey the Law of Moses, my servant—all the decrees and regulations that I gave him on Mount Sinai for all Israel.” (Mal 4:4 NLT) When the Jewish people obeyed the Law of Moses, it was an indication that they were living lives pleasing to God. Obedience still matters to God. It’s possible to hear so much about God’s grace and love that you can begin to think that God isn’t interested in obedience. But a careful reading of the New Testament will blow that theory out of that water! Jesus said, “Not everyone who calls out to me, “Lord! Lord!” will enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Only those who actually do the will of my Father in heaven will enter. On judgment day many will say to me, “Lord! Lord! We prophesied in your name and cast out demons in your name and performed many miracles in your name.” But I will reply, “I never knew you. Get away from me, you who break God’s laws.”” (Mt 7:21-23 NLT)

The best known part of Moses’ Law is called the Ten Commandments. It’s still a valid outline of what pleases God. When you worship God and Him alone, you please God. When you consider His Name and reputation sacred, you please God. When you remember to keep your life in balance with proper time given to worship, work and spiritual renewal, you please God. When you honor your parents, you please God. When you refuse to murder or hate, you please God.

When you turn away from adultery and lust, you please God. When you refuse to steal, you please God. When you tell the truth, you please God. When you live a life of contentment rather than envy, you please God. Will you always please God? Of course not! You'll fail; you'll sin. Confess it and move on. Never forget that you have the ability to please God when by the Holy Spirit's help you do what God says to do and live in the way He wants you to live.

Here's a final thought. When you please God, He promises blessing, healing, wholeness and fullness of life. There's two wonderful images found in Malachi 4:2 (NIV), "But for you who revere my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings. And you will go out and leap like calves released from the stall." Some believe that the phrase "the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings" is a prophecy about Jesus' coming and what He would do. Perhaps. But the passage makes better sense to me if you think of "righteousness" here as your own obedient, loving behavior towards God produced in you by the Holy Spirit. When you live like that, it's like the sun coming up and giving light and warmth causing things to grow and flourish. God's blessing will be upon your life. Obedience to Him releases a spiritual healing into your life that results in life as God wants you to experience it.

Then there's that second, wonderful image of a calf released from its confining, limited stall and allowed to run and romp through the fields. Have you ever seen that on a fresh, sunny spring day out in the country? A little calf, a little lamb, a little colt or filly leaping and jumping about – full of life and full of joy. Yes, life will indeed have its dark, heavy and painful moments. They come to all of us sooner or later. But the promise of God to all those who please Him – both in this life and the life to come – is one of freedom, joy and blessing. Life like a leaping calf!

An Army sergeant tried for 25 years to quit smoking. After multiple failed attempts, he went to an Army doctor for his yearly medical exam. The doctor told him that his health was being severely harmed by smoking and that he should stop. The sergeant confessed he knew he should stop and, in a tone of despair, related his multiple attempts to stop smoking over many years. The physician looked at him and said, "What are these two bars on my lapel?" The sergeant replied, "They mean you are a captain." "Yes," said the captain, "And they also mean I outrank you, and I am giving you a direct order to stop smoking." That sergeant went home and never smoked another cigarette. He couldn't quit on his own even after years of trying. But he could quit when he understood the power of a direct order from a superior officer. He was thoroughly indoctrinated by the United States Army and not willing to violate an order. If you're truly a follower of Jesus, He is your Commander-in-Chief. You'll find His commands in the New Testament. When you take them as seriously as that sergeant took his order to quit smoking, you'll be surprised how God can transform your life.

You can offend God. You can, also, please God. Not just your actions – but also your attitudes – matter so very much to Him.