

A Cheap Relationship

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[0 : 0 0] Well, tonight I would like us just to spend a little bit of time back in the chapter that we read from Malachi. It's not a book that we turn to very often, but it's a book that's got so much to teach us. We're going to look at some of the key emphases that are raised in chapter one, but we can just read again the opening words. The Oracle of the Word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. I want to start this evening with a question. I'm going to put the question on the screen. The question says, what would you say is the majority view of Christianity in Britain today? And I'm going to give you three options. Number one, number two, or number three. So number one, passionate follower of Christianity. Number two, bitter enemy of Christianity. Number three, not really that bothered. What would you say is the most popular view of Christianity in Britain today? Or to put it another way, if you were to go out into Kerala way just now and knock on someone's door and say, what do you think of Christianity? What do you think would be the most that people would say? Well, I don't think that most people would say passionate follower because most people aren't passionate followers. And I don't think that people would say bitter enemy because most people aren't bitter enemies. I think most people would say not really that bothered. And that makes Malachi an immensely relevant book because that's exactly the kind of people that he was talking to. So who was Malachi? Well, he was a prophet. That basically means that he was God's spokesman. And the name Malachi actually means my messenger. Malach means messenger and the I at the end means mine. So Malachi is God's messenger. And that's exactly what a prophet was. So his name reflects his role. And you'll know, I'm sure that in the Old Testament, there's loads of different prophets and they prophesied at different times and in different locations. And they were dealing with different circumstances.

But all the prophets in the Old Testament had one thing in common. They all came with a message of judgment and salvation. In other words, they all came with words of warning. And they all came with promises of hope. And that's a really helpful thing to remember. Whenever you look at the prophets, there's always that balance warning people of judgment. If they carry on turning away from God, but at the same time promising healing and restoration if they return to him. Whenever you see prophets, always think judgment and salvation, warning and hope Malachi was one of these prophets. Where did he live? Well, we don't know exactly where he lived, but he would have been in and around Jerusalem or the surrounding area. In terms of date, we don't have an exact date written in the book, but it's almost certain that it was around the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah. And that means that it's right at the end of the Old Testament. So you might say, well, that's obvious because this is the last book. But it's important to remember that when you look at all the books in the Old Testament, they're not in chronological order. So when you go through all the Old Testament books at about kind of halfway through, you get to Ezra and Nehemiah, you get to Second Kings, Second Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah and at the end of Second Kings, the end of Second Chronicles, they're all talking about the end of the Old Testament. That's the end chronologically of the Old Testament. Esther's the same. And then you go back a bit when you come to the prophets. Isaiah's earlier again. But then when you come to Malachi, you're back towards the very end of the Old Testament around the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah, Zachariah. In terms of that whole story of the Old Testament, one of the helpful ways to think of the Old Testament is to think of a Nike tic. Now, has anybody got Nike trainers? You've got Nike trainers or Nike jumper at home, you'll know that they've got a tic as their logo. And you can think of Old Testament history like a tic in the sense that basically from kind of really Joshua onwards, it's just downward. The general trajectory is downward. It's a negative story. And although there's some glimmers of success along the way, on the whole Old Testament history is the story of Israel's failure. But at the end, there's a weak limit of hope. And so that's why it's a tic. It's not just a

downward slide, downward spiral. There is a weak tic. And so that's why I've hijacked the Nike logo to represent Old Testament history. There's a glimmer of hope at the end, because at this point with Malachi, Malachi is about here, I suppose. At that point, the people had returned from exile. And if you know anything about Ezra and Nehemiah, they're kind of trying to rebuild Jerusalem, and they're trying to get reestablished. They're restoring the temple, and they're trying to get the country back up and running again after the devastation of being conquered by the Babylonians. So the lowest point is Ezekiel here, when Ezekiel,

[5 : 43] Jeremiah, Lamentations, that's when Jerusalem was conquered, the temple was destroyed. And afterwards, there's just this weak tic on the way up, Malachi's in the tic. What did he say? Well, Malachi was challenging the attitudes of the people in Israel, particularly in terms of their relationships, both their relationship with God and their relationship with others. And if you were to read through the whole of Malachi, you'd see that balance, relationship towards God, relationship with other people. The people at this time were not passionate followers of God, nor were they bitter enemies. Instead, they were just not that bothered. Their worship of God had become half-hearted. And that's what chapter one focuses on. And so I want us just to look at it together. In many ways, Malachi is a book full of questions. You go through the book, there's lots of questions that get asked. Now normally when we talk about questions, we're referring to a positive thing, because questions are brilliant. If you want to learn about Jesus, always ask questions. And this is something that I should probably say more often than I do, that if anybody here, either watching online or here, ever has a question about Jesus, or about anything in the Bible that you want to know the answer to, please ask. Ask anytime. You can email me, you can talk to me, you can talk to an elder. Always ask if you've got a question. Questions are brilliant in that context. If you're wanting to learn about Jesus, if you're reading the

Bible. Same as if you're pastoring people. If somebody was to go to Laura for counselling, she would ask a lot of questions. And that would be a great way to help the person. Same with us if you wanted to help somebody asking questions, listening to answers is a good thing.

Same as through evangelism. Asking questions in evangelism is a great thing to do. Asking somebody, well, what do you believe? And what do you think of Jesus? What do you think about life and about death? What do you base that on? Why, what's your foundation for those conclusions that you have? Those kind of questions are great. Questions are normally a brilliant thing, but not here. These questions are not good questions. And the bad questions that the people ask reveal a bad mindset that they have towards God. You can see that I'll just flick through them quickly. I'm going to highlight three. It opens with God saying, I've loved you, but they've replied by saying, how have you loved us? And then you move a little bit further on. God says, you know, you've despised my name. And they're like, how have we despised your name? And he says, you know, you've offered polluted food to my office. How have we polluted you? And so these questions that I've just put up on the screen there, they're not positive. They're not the questions of sincere inquiry. Instead, they're the questions of disagreement and confrontation. The first one is doubting God's goodness.

God says he loves them and their response is, how? How have you loved us? And, you know, that probably partly arose from their circumstances. If we're at the bottom of the, or just past the bottom of the naik tik, you know, they've lost, they were conquered, Jerusalem was knocked down and destroyed, the temple was reduced to rubble, they're trying to restore it. And when God says, I've loved you, they're like, really? Look at the mess that we've been in.

How have you loved us? And so there's a suspicion of God's love in that question. The second two questions, how have we despised your name? How have we polluted you? They are doubting our badness. So first question doubts God's goodness. Second one doubts our badness. When God highlights their sin, their response is denial. How have we done that? That's what they say. And the conversations that we're seeing here between God and His people in chapter one are highlighting that the people's attitude was not right. And the result of that is that you see some really stark contrasts between God and the people of Israel set before us here in the passage. And it's these contrasts that I want us to look at together tonight.

[10 : 24] We're going to look at three contrasts between God and the people. So first of all, we're going to notice a contrast between what the people meant to God. I'll just write it down.

Contrast between what the people meant to God and what God meant to the people. This opening chapter shows us what these people meant to God. The very first statement that's made in this

prophecy is that God loves them and that He always has. And that love that God has for them is emphasised by the contrast that's made between Israel and Esau or Edom.

If I just jump back a couple of slides, you can see that. I've loved you. And then there's this contrast. It's not Esau, Jacob's brother declares the Lord that I've loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated. I've laid this hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.

If Edom says we're shattered, we rebuild the Lord says they may build and I may tear down. Now, just to explain what's going on here, Esau was Jacob's brother, as I think you, I'm sure you maybe remember. Edom is the nation that descended from him. So Esau, Edom, it's kind of the same thing. Jacob was Esau's brother and Israel is the nation that's descended from him. So Esau and Edom go together, Jacob and Israel go together, a person and a nation that descended from him. And there's this contrast being said before you hear between the fact that God loves the people of Israel. Edom, he's hated. Now, when we read that, our instant thought can be that sounds really harsh on Edom, that sounds really harsh on Esau, what's going on? Well, the key point is that that's not the point that's being made. The point is not, Esau is awful and I hate them. The point is Israel is special.

Israel is the one I've loved. And you know, you could look at Edom and think they're doing far better than us. But God has said, look, no, you're the ones I have set my love upon.

[12:51] The key point is that Israel is special to God. And compared to other nations, no matter how successful they might be, Israel is unique. The Israelites thought that their failure was proof that God didn't love them. But God has said, I've always loved you and I always will. No matter how successful another nation like Edom might look, they will not last. And so you mustn't think that you have to be like them or follow them. Now, for us, a clear example of this might be the Roman Empire. Imagine, you know, we've, in our morning services, we've been thinking a lot about being one of these cities, one of these cities that Jesus wrote to in Revelation. End of the first century, the Roman Empire is all powerful. And in that situation, Rome seems to have it all. And the church seems so tiny.

And you could easily be a Christian in Pergamum or Sardis or Thyatira, any of these places. Think, if I want to be safe and secure, I should go with them. I should join Rome and forget the church because the church is, is hanging by a thread. Rome is where all the strength lies. But where's Rome today? Where's the Roman Empire? It's long gone. And there's a really important lesson for us all here. It's so easy to think that following the successful crowd that's got no interest in Jesus is the way to go. It's so easy to think that. And, and for young folk here as well, or watching at home online, you know, you might be in the minority at school in your class, or when you go to uni, there might be loads and loads of people who seem to be getting on fine with no word of Jesus in their lives. Please don't think, oh, I should just be like them. And then I'll be fine. Please don't think that. And history shows and scripture shows that these crowds don't last. So to God, Israel were unique. And the other key thing to remember is that from day one in the Old Testament, the door was always open to other nations. So Israel's big problem was that it looked at other nations like Edom and whoever and thought, oh, we should go and be like them.

When the whole point of Israel was to stand there as a light and say, come and join us, the door was always open for these nations to come in and to worship God. And even in this chapter at the very end, it talks about the fact that all nations will worship God.

So the contrast here is not between nations, races. It's between those who are in a covenant relationship with God and those who aren't. Israel was chosen by God in this period to be a light to the world. They were so special to God. But there's a huge contrast between what the people meant to God and what God meant to these people. And in terms of what God meant to these people, the answer is not very much. And that's shown in their worship.

[15:57] There's lots of stuff described here in this chapter about flocks and altars and offerings. All of that's pointing us to the sacrificial system that was at the heart of Old Testament worship. And one of the key things about that sacrificial system was that people were meant to take an offering to the Lord. It was based on how much they could afford, whether it would be a bull or a sheep or maybe a bird if they were poorer. But whatever it was, if it was from their flock, the animal that they brought was to be the best of their flock.

It should be something without spot or blemish. It was to be from the best of what they had. But instead, these people were offering the lame, the blind and the sick. In other words, they were offering the ones that weren't worth very much. So that meant that instead of people coming with a

sacrifice, something valuable that they were giving up and offering to God, their offerings were much more like a means of getting rid of the leftovers. They gave what they didn't want and what they wouldn't have kept. In other words, their worship had become half-hearted. And so they wanted to maintain this kind of outward appearance.

Yes, I'm going to take the temple. Yes, I'm being loyal to God. But give my best ram. Oh, no, no way. I'll take the sick one. I'll take the one that's limping and that's pretty poorly looking. It's going to die anyway. So I'll just offer that one as a sacrifice instead. And that just showed that they weren't really that bothered what God thought. And you know, we might think, well, this is a million miles from life just now. We're not offering sheep and lambs and all that kind of stuff. But it's still incredibly relevant because if Malachi was to come and look at my life, if he was to look at the way I used my time, the way I spend my money, if he was to look at my ambitions, my priorities, if he was to look at how well I love other people, would he say that God is getting the best?

Or would he say that God is getting a leftover? Far too often in my life I've given God the leftover. And I want that to change because God means more to me than that. There's a great contrast between what the people meant to God and what God meant to the people. There's also a big contrast between what God wanted and what the people wanted. I wish I could write faster and neatly at the same time. I clearly can't. I chose speed over neatness as you can see. So contrast between what God wanted and what the people wanted. So what does God want in these verses? He wants commitment. He wants a relationship with these people that's real and genuine, not one that's half-hearted. In fact, verse 10 says that God would rather shut the door of the temple instead of this kind of nominal half-hearted worship that they had. He says, I wish there was one of you that would just shut the door that you would not kindle a fire on my altar in vain. I've got no pleasure in this rubbish. And it all relates back to the fact that throughout the Bible, God's relationship with his people is based on a covenant relationship. And if that means anything, it means that God wants a relationship that is based on utter commitment. That's why he says at the very start, I have loved you. God is utterly committed to his covenant relationship with these people. God wants commitment. The people, however, didn't want commitment. They wanted convenience.

As we said, they just offered any old animal and worshiping God had become a convenient way of purging their flocks of the weakest stock. But even then, their worship of God was becoming a burden. There's this fascinating statement in verse 13 where God says, you say, what a weariness this is, and you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what's been taken by violence or is lame and sick, and this you bring as your offering. So you've got this great description of the people expected to come and make an offering to God. You've got this great description of the people expected to come and make an offering to God, and they're just like, what a hassle, what a pain. And there's a tragic irony here. For the people here, God had become a bit of a pain. And yet the truth is, in terms of the whole of Old Testament history and in terms really of all of humanity ever since the fall, the truth is, it's the people who are the pain. And it's definitely true in Malachi's time, definitely true in the Old Testament, it was the people of God who were a pain. They were a nightmare. They were constantly disobeying God, constantly turning away from Him, constantly refusing to listen to Him, constantly chasing after the latest crazy idols and habits that they saw in the nations around them. And yet in it all, God remained totally committed to them. God was constantly faithful, trustworthy and reliable. He blessed them abundantly.

[21 : 47] He gave them amazing privileges. And yet to these people, God had become a hassle. All they wanted was convenience. And I think that's a really important lesson as well for me, for you, that we've got to be careful about convenience. Now in saying that, I'm not saying that following Jesus should always be inconvenient. Sometimes you can get that impression that people sort of try to make out that the worse your life is, the better Christian you are.

That's not true at all. Not saying that following Jesus should always be a sort of grief in your life. That's not true because following a Christian is amazing. It's the best life that any of us can ever have. But at the same time, we've got to remember that commitment and convenience rarely go together. Anybody here who's taken home a newborn baby is going to know exactly what that means. The commitment to look after that child is inconvenient, especially when you realise on the first Sunday morning that babies don't lie in on Sundays. And it's true in many areas of life. Work, you know, work that's just really convenient to know that you can pick up and put down. There's a huge lack of commitment there. Marriage, parenting, health. Even if you want to be healthy, if you're committed to being healthy and fit, that's inconvenient because you've got to try and build that into

your lifestyle.

And it's absolutely true in terms of our faith. So often, commitment will come at the price of convenience or it will be the other way around. Convenience will come at the price of commitment. And when you think of that balance, when you think of yourself, you know, well, okay, I want to follow Jesus. I want to be committed to him, but I know that it might be inconvenient. And then you think, well, I don't want it to be inconvenient, then I don't want to be uncommitted to Jesus. And you've got this trade off between commitment and convenience, commitment or convenience. Which one do you think is better? Which one do you think is worth it? There's a great contrast between what God wanted and what the people wanted. And then there's this last contrast between who God is or who God really is and then how they actually treated him. I really should have made my headings shorter so that I didn't have to write them out so much. How they actually treated him. So the chapter says before is this contrast between who God really is and then how the people actually treated him. We're given several wonderful reminders about who God really is in this chapter. I'll highlight four. Verse six talks about the fact that God is Father. He's the one who cares for and provides for and who loves his people. And that rightly means he's worthy of honour. And as it says there, if I'm a father, where is my honour? And you know, throughout all of history, but especially in these days, a father was to be deeply respected.

And that's absolutely true of God. Now that doesn't, you know, in our modern society, that doesn't kind of, you know, excuse the behaviour of bad fathers. It's just more a principle that, you know, has shaped so much of history that a father, a good father is worthy of honour. Verse six also tells us that God is master. He's the one who's in charge and that means that he's not to be treated flippantly and he's not to be, you know, just sort of scoffed at, snorted at in the language of Malachi. Instead, he's to be feared. You can see that there. Where is my fear? Not in the sense of being frightened of him, but in the sense of due reverence before God. We're also told that God is the ruler of all nations. He alone is God. Doesn't matter where the sun rises. He is ruler of all. And in verse 14, we're told that God is the great king. And again, this is very important in terms of where we are in terms of Old Testament history because Israel had suffered at the hands of many great kings. Tiglath Pileser, the king of the Assyrians, had crushed the northern kingdom in 722. Nebuchadnezzar, king of the Babylonians, had come and destroyed Jerusalem in 586 BC. They knew all about the power of great kings around them.

And even now in Malachi's days, they're under the rule of a great king in Persia, but Malachi is reminding them and us that ultimately these kings are nothing. God alone is the great king. His name will be feared among the nations. So we're giving this amazing reminder. God is Father. He's master. He is ruler of all nations. He is the great king. That's who God really is. But the reality of who God really is stands in tragic contrast to how these people actually treated him. As we've been saying, they were half hearted. They were fed up and they were giving God the leftovers. And there's this really sharp contrast given to us in verse 8. When you offer blind animals and sacrifice, is that not evil? When you offer the lame and the sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor. Will he accept you or show you favor? Says the Lord's of hosts. In other words, God is saying, see what you're giving me. You wouldn't dare give that to the Persian governor. But it seems the people were far more concerned about impressing that governor than they were concerned about honoring God. And again, it's reminding us that it is easy in the Christian life to do stuff to God that we would never do to other people. And you can see that in lots of different ways. One of the ways that we can sometimes see that is in terms of rules and requirements that we're given. So every so often, we are given rules and requirements that we rightly have to follow, that we're given them by the government. So we've been given loads of rules throughout lockdown that we've all had to follow and we've rightly conformed to them.

[28 : 39] And you're all still wearing masks tonight because of that. And rightly so. That's absolutely appropriate because it's all done for our protection. Same with rules regarding health and safety. Same with rules regarding GDPR and all that kind of stuff. When rules like these are introduced, we jump to attention and we make sure we do what we're asked. And that's absolutely right. We should do that. But for 2000 years, the governor of this church, Jesus Christ, has said, don't gossip. Don't judge. Be patient. Love your neighbour.

And yet, do we give those commands the same attention? And I'm not saying that to make everyone feel guilty. I'm not saying it to kind of lay on a guilt trip. But I'm not saying that stuff like masks should be neglected. I'm absolutely not saying that at all. But I'm just looking at myself and

praying, Lord, please help me to remember who you really are. And if we remember that he's father, he's master, he's ruler, he is the great king, then that's going to help me and you remember that what really matters is to prioritise what God wants and what he expects. And ultimately, what God wants is a committed, genuine, real, covenant relationship with us, where he's our God and we are his people. And that brings us back to the questions that we started with that arise from this chapter. These questions reveal the attitude that the people had towards God. You remember we said that the first one was doubting God's goodness and the second two were doubting or denying our badness.

Doubting God's goodness, denying our badness, these two things have repeatedly ruined the relationship between God and humanity ever since Adam and Eve. In Genesis 3, this is exactly what Satan made Eve do. He got Eve to question God's goodness and in the aftermath of the fall, Adam immediately tried to deny his failure. He blamed Eve, he blamed God.

There was a doubting of God's goodness, there was a denial of our badness. Ever since then, he has been doing the same. So often, we blame God for stuff and we absolve ourselves of responsibility. We bring God down and we talk ourselves up and we can present it in a wee graph like this just to finish off. That's the kind of thing that happens. We deny our badness and we talk ourselves up. We're suspicious of God's goodness and we kind of bring Him down. And that leads to a casual attitude towards God because we end up thinking, well, he's not that different to us and there's not that much of a difference. He's not that good and we're not that bad and that leaves to a pretty half-hearted, not that bothered view of God. And the crucial truth we need to recognise is that that graph is totally inaccurate.

We cannot pull God down. We cannot talk ourselves up. The Bible does not bring God and humanity close together like that. The Bible puts them miles apart. God's righteousness is impeccable.

[32 : 35] Our sinfulness is far worse than we even realise at our lowest points. And the contrast is so crucial because graph number one makes a relationship with God not that big a deal, whereas graph number two makes a relationship with God an astounding privilege. In other words, graph one is a cheap relationship. Graph number two is a costly relationship.

But for that to happen, for there to be a relationship in the terms of graph number two, you think how is it possible? The gap between us and God is huge and the only problem with that graph is that it's a monumental understatement. There's just an enormous gap between us and God. We can't talk our way around it. There's a standard that God expects that we can never reach. There's a worthiness that God requires that we cannot match up to. In other words, there's a massive cost to be met. But the amazing truth is that in order for there to be a costly, precious, committed relationship between you and God, in order for that costly relationship to be a reality, he pays. The gap between us and God is massive. That's the gap that Jesus steps into. He covers all the cost. And that's the key thing that we need to recognise because the first graph there, that just needs a tiny

Jesus. The second graph needs a massive Jesus. And that's what we have. That's exactly what we have. And the fact that the Bible puts God and us miles apart is to show you just how much Jesus has done for you. And that is ultimately what God means when in verse 2 of Malachi he says, I love you. It doesn't mean, you know, I love you because you're just only a wee bit lower than me. You're actually really quite nice. I love you. No, that's what it means. The fact that there's a massive gap, but he will fill it by giving his own son. God wants a costly relationship with you. He doesn't want a cheap relationship with you. He wants a costly relationship with you. But thanks be to God, he pays. And that's why the ultimate message of Malachi isn't, you know, these Israelites were half-hearted. You need to pull your socks up and make sure you're not like them. That's not the message of Malachi. The message of Malachi is that God's commitment to you is so great that at the end of this Old Testament era, you need to look forward to the fact that I am sending my son to be your savior because God will not give up on you, no matter how much it costs him. And it's when we recognize that incredible love, you know, you think of stuff that, you know, the Israelites looked at things like this, they're a graph like that, and they were like, oh, following God and obeying God is a pain. You look at that graph and you're like following God is just amazing. It's the greatest privilege that any of us could have. God said to these Israelites, I love you. They responded by saying, how? God is saying the same to you. He's saying, I love you. And I hope and pray that your response is not to say, how? I hope your response is to say, I love you too. I mean.

[37 : 00] Father, we thank you so much for the magnitude of your love. We're so sorry for the times that we've been half-hearted. But we thank you that Jesus has filled every millimeter of the gap that our sin has placed between us and you. And we just declare to you again that we love you so much. Amen.

We're going to conclude by singing together from the Sing Sam's version of Psalm 119 as we've been doing over the past few weeks. We're reintroducing, presenting during the final Psalm of the evening service. Delighted that Phil is going to present for us. We're going to be singing from Sing Sam's Psalm 119 from verse 97 to verse 104 so we can stand and sing these words together.