

RETURN TO ME, AND I WILL RETURN TO YOU

Malachi 2:10-3:12

Key Verse: 3:7b, "Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts."

Today, Malachi continues his rebuking message to Israel in three areas: marriage, injustice and tithing. Malachi says they are faithless, irreverent, and that they are robbing God. We should not be smug or self-confident in these areas. May God help us to prayerfully reflect how we need to uphold the sanctity of marriage, to be purified of irreverent behavior, and to be generous toward God and the ministries of the LORD. May we take the LORD's rebuke through the prophet Malachi to heart for our own time and context.

First, marriage problems.

Look at 2:10-12. "Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem. For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the LORD, which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign god. May the LORD cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the LORD of hosts!"

God made a covenant with Israel that he would be their God and they would be his people. To live as his people, meant upholding God's laws to them. One of those laws concerned idolatrous nations around them: "You shall not intermarry with them, giving your daughters to their sons or taking their daughters for your sons, for they would turn away your sons from following me, to serve other gods. Then the anger of the LORD would be kindled against you, and he would destroy you quickly" (Dt 7:3-4).

But this is what the returned exiles were doing. In fact the book of Ezra the priest also addresses this sin. Ezra ends with a long list of 111 men who had married foreign women and who were challenged to "put away" these foreign wives. That is radical obedience!

One of the radical reforms of Nehemiah the governor involved this very sin: "I saw the Jews who had married [foreign] women...half of their children spoke the [foreign] language...and could not speak the language of Judah...I confronted them and cursed them and beat some of them and pulled out their hair. And I made them take an oath in the name of God, saying, "You shall not give your daughters to their sons, or take their

daughters for your sons or for yourselves.” These were the radical reforms of Ezra and Nehemiah to help God’s people to return to God.

Marriage is a holy institution that God created. Whom we marry is not a light matter to God. This is why Apostle Paul charged that a believer must marry “in the Lord.” He wrote, “A wife is bound to her husband as long as he lives. But if her husband dies, she is free to be married to whom she wishes, only in the Lord” (1Co 7:39). Here, “in the Lord” means to marry another believer. Marriage is like two oxen yoked together. If they both love the Lord, they can do great work together for the Lord. If one of them goes in another direction, after other gods or idols, the marriage will not produce good fruit, and raising godly children will be unrealistic. Marrying someone who loves the Lord has God’s blessing. Marrying an unbeliever is not wise. God gives no promise to bless such unions.

There is another sin regarding marriage in these verses: divorce. Malachi says “guard yourselves” twice in verses 15b-16: “So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth. ‘For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.’”

Marriage is a holy covenant before God between one man and one woman. Many marriages include the vows to “be faithful, in sickness and in health, for richer or for poorer, for better or for worse, til death do us part.” Even though many marriages include these vows, many end up in divorce. God calls divorce “faithless to the wife of your youth”, and an act of “violence.”

Jesus spoke strongly against divorce, a practice which seems to have been common in his time. Listen to Jesus’ teaching: “But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery” (Mt 5:32). Jesus understood that people divorce almost always to commit adultery. Of course, there are exceptions to this, such as infidelity or abuse. But most divorces are on much lighter grounds, such as incompatibility. Living or sleeping together before marriage is not a Christian option. The culture these days approves of this to test compatibility. In actuality, the hook up culture fuels the divorce rate. God disapproves of divorce.

Once Ruth Bell Graham, the wife of the famous evangelist Billy Graham was asked, “Have you ever considered divorce in your marriage?” She replied, “Divorce? Never. Murder? Perhaps.” Of course, she was joking. But her reply indicated two things about

her marriage: her marriage to a great man of God had very difficult times, but she was fully committed to making any problems work out between them.

Jesus' teaching on marriage was against divorce. When questioned about divorce, Jesus echoed God's original intention for marriage. Jesus said, "Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let not man separate" (Mt 19:4-6).

According to Jesus, divorce is not an option. If you are married, don't wait for a crisis to work on it. I urge all married couples to work on your marriages. Attend a marriage retreat. Take a marriage enrichment class. Read a book on marriage together with your spouse. Especially, read and study the Bible together, and pray together. God will bless those who do. The couple that prays together, stays together.

Second, injustice. Now look at the Israelites' next argument with the LORD in verse 17: "You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, 'How have we wearied him?' By saying, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them.' Or by asking, 'Where is the God of justice?'"

From time to time we look at the sinsick world and wonder why God doesn't do something about it. Or, we think our good deeds are not rewarded, while evildoers seem to have an easy life with many blessings. Perhaps we even envy those who have many luxuries or more spending money than we have. How did God reply to their complaint for justice?

God assures them that justice is coming. Look at 3:1. "Behold, I send my messenger, and he will prepare the way before me. And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts." God says, "Behold, justice is coming." God would send a messenger, who would prepare the way before the LORD. The New Testament identifies this messenger as John the Baptist (Mt 11:10-11). He was the messenger who broke 400 years of silence after Malachi. Malachi also foretold: "And the Lord whom you seek will suddenly come to his temple; and the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming, says the LORD of hosts" (3:1b). This we know is our Lord Jesus Christ, the Messiah.

Malachi foretold that this message would not be sweet and gentle and pleasing to the ears. He said: "But who can endure the day of his coming, and who can stand when he

appears? For he is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. He will sit as a refiner and purifier of silver, and he will purify the sons of Levi and refine them like gold and silver, and they will bring offerings in righteousness to the LORD" (3:2-3). He is like a refiner's fire and like fullers' soap. Refiner's fire purifies silver and gold, burning away impurities. Fullers' soap cleanses away filth. God promised to purify the Levites, that is, the priests, the leaders of God's people. Then they could lead God's people in true worship and obedience to the LORD.

John the Baptist said of Jesus, "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire" (Mt 3:11-12).

When Jesus came, he severely rebuked the chief priests and teachers of the law with many woes, calling them hypocrites. Jesus also drove out merchants and money-changers from the temple saying, "'My house shall be called a house of prayer for all the nations.' But you have made it a den of robbers" (Mk 11:17).

Malachi said still more about God's justice and purifying his people: "Then I will draw near to you for judgment. I will be a swift witness against the sorcerers, against the adulterers, against those who swear falsely, against those who oppress the hired worker in his wages, the widow and the fatherless, against those who thrust aside the sojourner, and do not fear me, says the LORD of hosts" (3:5).

God calls out several sins here: sorcery, adultery, perjury, and oppressing employees or helpless people—like widows, orphans and foreigners. God is particularly upset with taking advantage of others, which is injustice. God says such people do not fear God. Pure religion is to have a proper respect, honor and fear of God. James 1:27 says, "Religion that is pure and undefiled before God the Father is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world." May God help each one of us to accept his refining fire and cleansing with the spirit of repentance.

This cleansing ultimately does not come through our effort to clean up our own lives, like making a new year's resolution. This cleansing and refining comes from the Lord. This was made possible for us through the atoning sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and it is applied to us when we come to him in repentance and faith. Comparing Christ to lamb sacrifices, the Bible promises, "how much more will the blood of Christ, who through the eternal Spirit offered himself without blemish to God, purify our conscience from dead works to serve the living God" (Heb 9:14). Let us return to God in repentance and faith.

“Therefore, brothers (and sisters), since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus...let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful” (Heb 10:19, 22-23).

Third, tithing.

Look at 3:6. “For I the LORD do not change; therefore you, O children of Jacob, are not consumed.” God’s refining fire is to purify his people, not destroy them, for God is great in mercy. God is faithful to his covenant. Thanks be to our merciful God.

God’s people Israel, and we too, are unfaithful and stubborn. Look at verse 7. “From the days of your fathers you have turned aside from my statutes and have not kept them. Return to me, and I will return to you, says the LORD of hosts. But you say, ‘How shall we return?’”

God invites his people Israel as well as us: “Return to me, and I will return to you.” But how shall we return? Israel asked God this question. So God told them how they could return. Look at verses 8-10a. “Will man rob God? Yet you are robbing me. But you say, ‘How have we robbed you?’ In your tithes and contributions. You are cursed with a curse, for you are robbing me, the whole nation of you. Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house.”

In the law, God commanded his people to bring a tithe or 10% of their produce to the temple. Why? It was for the Levites who served in the temple, since serving the LORD was their livelihood. God said, “To the Levites I have given every tithe in Israel for an inheritance, in return for their service that they do, their service in the tent of meeting” (Num 18:21).

“And the Levite, because he has no portion or inheritance with you, and the sojourner, the fatherless, and the widow, who are within your towns, shall come and eat and be filled, that the LORD your God may bless you in all the work of your hands that you do” (Dt 14:29). So, in bringing their tithes to God at the temple the people were providing for the LORD’s ministers, as well as food for the disadvantaged foreigners, orphans and widows.

Now look at Malachi 3:10-12, “Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. And thereby put me to the test, says the LORD of hosts, if I will not

open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you a blessing until there is no more need. I will rebuke the devourer for you, so that it will not destroy the fruits of your soil, and your vine in the field shall not fail to bear, says the LORD of hosts. Then all nations will call you blessed, for you will be a land of delight, says the LORD of hosts."

God said "put me to the test." Usually we should not test God (Dt 6:16; Mt 4:7). But here, God invites his people to test him. God is saying: "Try me. Give a tithe, and see what happens. I guarantee, good things will happen. Your crops and your vineyards will flourish. And nations will see and call you blessed." There are many in this church who tithe, and they can all testify to God's blessing on their giving.

Jesus was not against tithing. He rebuked the religious leaders not for tithing, but for not practicing justice, mercy and faithfulness (Mt 23:23). Without these, tithing is hypocritical. The New Testament doesn't command tithing. But it promises blessing on those who are generous. Jesus said, "give, and it will be given to you. Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For with the measure you use it will be measured back to you" (Lk 6:38).

Apostle Paul challenged the Corinthian church to be generous in offering: "The point is this: whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each one must give as he has decided in his heart, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver" (2Co 9:6-7). Paul went on, "He who supplies seed to the sower and bread for food will supply and multiply your seed for sowing and increase the harvest of your righteousness. You will be enriched in every way to be generous in every way, which through us will produce thanksgiving to God. For the ministry of this service is not only supplying the needs of the saints but is also overflowing in many thanksgivings to God" (2Co 9:10-12).

Once more, Paul wrote in Philippians, the inspiring letter we are studying this summer: "I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied, having received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus" (Php 4:18-19). Apostle Paul knew the secret of God's provision and of God's blessing upon those who are generous.

In conclusion God wants us to return to him. He wants us to guard marriage as sacred. He wants us to have our hearts purified from sin and injustice. He wants us to be generous givers toward the LORD and the needy. Lord, we return to you, in repentance and faith. May God help us to return to him by pursuing godly marriage, justice and generous giving, all in Jesus' name. Amen.