



Lynn and I do a fair amount of premarital counseling and we always try to cover how to resolve conflict as a couple. One of the most obvious things healthy couples do is deal with conflict instead of just avoiding it. There are some couples who just never deal with their issues because it's too painful, but even though you may keep the peace, when you do that you always lose the opportunity to grow and learn. In a sense, your relationship stagnates. Lovers really do quarrel.

When we put our trust in Jesus Christ, we enter into a relationship with him. It's a sacred romance. In fact, many times our relationship with God is depicted in the Bible as a marriage. And just as in a marriage, there are times when lovers quarrel and things go wrong; when communication breaks down; when issues arise that have to be dealt with.

We come today to the last chapter of *The Story* in the Old Testament. When the story of the Old Testament ends there's something of a lover's quarrel going on between God and his people. Let me give you some background. Jerusalem was destroyed and God's people were taken into exile in Babylon. This exile lasted for 70 years, ending when Babylon fell to the Persian King, Cyrus the Great. He allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild the temple. But the Jewish people didn't return in one big happy throng. Several groups straggled back from about 535 BC. to 445 BC. The first group found the city of Jerusalem in ruins. They started to build the temple, but construction soon lagged. Then the prophet Haggai came along and spurred the project toward completion. The temple was finished around the time that a priest named Ezra led another group back from Persia. Then, finally, the last group returned, led by Nehemiah. His main job was to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem.

It was during Nehemiah's time a guy named Malachi showed up. He was a prophet. His name means "my messenger." We've learned by now whenever a prophet shows up he usually has a bone to pick with the Israelites. They're usually in a state of moral and spiritual decline. When Malachi showed up, the Jewish people had grown apathetic in their relationship with God. A kind of spiritual malaise set in. The passionate relationship God wanted to have with them had cooled. The fire was gone. They were spiritually bored and became careless in their walk with God.

So Malachi comes along and confronts the issues head on. His book is easy to find; it's the last in the entire Old Testament! After God speaks through Malachi he won't speak again for 400 years.

Questioning God's Love

By the way he starts out you can see it's all about relationship. As I said, this is a lover's quarrel. Look at 1:2–3.

"I have loved you," says the Lord.

"But you ask, 'How have you loved us?'"

"Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the Lord.

"Yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated, and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals."

God opens with a declaration, "I have loved you." That's always where God starts. He doesn't start with how badly you've messed up or "do this and do that." He starts with "I have loved you." But the people aren't convinced. They ask, "How have you loved us?" Behind this is a what-have-you-done-for-me-lately kind of attitude. It's like, "If you loved me, I wouldn't have lost my job." Or "If you loved me, my husband wouldn't have left." But God doesn't get into that. Instead, he digs back into the beginnings of his relationship with them. They were descendants of Jacob, so he reminds them, "I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated." This bothers us. How can God hate anyone? That's not fair! But "hate" is a relative term here. In the Hebrew language "hate" can simply mean to be the one **not** chosen. God is just saying, "I chose Jacob's descendants to be my people through whom the Messiah would come, not Esau and his descendants." Of course, we also know Esau chose to walk away from God and God allowed him to make that choice. Jacob was far from perfect, too, but he was more responsive to God. We're talking here about the mystery of divine election. It's difficult to unravel, but the point is God says, "Here's tangible proof that I've loved you, but you're doubting my love."

Sometimes we doubt his love. We ask God, "How have you loved us?" Maybe we feel he's cheated us in some way. But, again, God digs into the past and says, "Here's tangible proof of my love. I chose you. I sent my only Son to bear the penalty for your sin. I opened your eyes and drew you near and now you're mine." It's good for us to evaluate our love relationship with God. When we drift away from God we begin to doubt his love. Do you feel secure in his love? Do you wake up in the morning relieved to remember he loves you? When I became a Christian the idea that overwhelmed me the most was I was loved and nothing I could ever do would change that. It was that which compelled me to change. It wasn't the other way around. It wasn't, "If you change, then I'll love you." That's religion. The gospel is "He loves me, therefore I want to change. I can change."

With that God deals with several areas where they've been unfaithful to him. Again, he's doing this not because he's rejecting them but because he wants them to return to him. In chapter 3 he even says, *"Return to me, and I will return to you"* (v. 7). Those are tender words. God invites reconciliation, but we need to know what that looks like. So God points out several things we need to deal with. I'm just going to have us look at two of them because I find these two things so relevant for our own lives.

Unfaithfulness in Marriage

The first has to do with our love life and marriage. We think the institution of marriage is in trouble today, but it was in trouble in Malachi's day as well. Look what he says in chapter 2.

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. 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 (verses 11–12).

He mentions unfaithfulness here. They were being unfaithful to God and to one another. This came out mostly, as it does with us, in their love life.

First, the men of Israel were marrying foreign women. The issue here isn't race. God isn't concerned about bloodlines. God created all races and has no problem with interracial marriages. The issue is faith. God had told his people to marry within their faith, otherwise their own hearts would be led astray to worship other gods.

The same principle is carried forward in the New Testament. In 2 Corinthians Paul says, *"Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial? Or what does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God"* (2 Cor. 6:14–16a). We don't see a lot of yokes here in the Bay Area, but try to visualize what would happen if a farmer yoked together, say, a cow and a donkey. The heavy wooden yoke, designed to harness the strength of the team, would be askew, as the animals are of different heights, weights, walk at different speeds and with different gaits. The yoke, instead of harnessing the power of the team to complete the task, would rub and chafe **both** animals, since the load would be distributed unequally. An unequal marriage isn't just unwise for the Christian, it's also unfair to the non-Christian, and will end up being a trial for them both.

We can quote a passage like this until we're blue in the face, but when someone has already allowed their heart to become attached to a person outside the faith, it's hard to reason with them. Somehow, their case is eligible for an exemption, considering how much they love each other, how the unbeliever supports and understands the Christian's faith, how they're

soul-mates despite the absence of a shared soul-faith. I still tell them, "Don't do it. Marriage is hard enough when you're spiritually compatible." In the words of one woman who was married to a perfectly nice man who didn't share her faith: "If you think you're lonely before you get married, it's nothing compared to how lonely you can be after you're married!" Some of you are in that situation and God would have you stay in that marriage and be the best wife or husband you can be.

But, if you're unmarried, evaluate this area of your life. Are you in a relationship with an unbeliever? Are you contemplating marriage to someone who doesn't share your love for Christ and your passion to serve him? To do so would be an act of unfaithfulness to God. You'll cause immeasurable pain for your spouse, your children, your church and yourself.

But that's not all. Look at verses 13–16.

Another thing you do: You flood the Lord's altar with tears. You weep and wail because he no longer looks with favor on your offerings or accepts them with pleasure from your hands. 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.

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.

"The man who hates and divorces his wife," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "does violence to the one he should protect," says the Lord Almighty.

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

The men of Israel were casually divorcing their wives, probably to run off with these foreign women! They were treating their wife as something they could cast aside like an old pair of shoes. Notice what she's called here: She's your "partner." That word means to be joined together. It hearkens back to the "one flesh" teaching of Genesis 2. He also calls her "the wife of your youth." Not "your youthful wife" but "the wife of your youth." She's the one who caught your eye; the one you fell in love with; the one who put you through school and stuck with you when you barely made enough money to pay the rent; the one who bore your children, wiped their noses, changed their diapers and drove them to soccer practice. Now you're going to leave her? Finally he calls her "the wife of your marriage covenant." God enters into covenant with us. He's faithful to that and he reminds us here marriage is a covenant too. Next to our covenant with God, the most meaningful covenant a man can make is with his wife. You can't disregard that covenant and expect God to just go along with it. "Oh, no big deal. I'm flexible. I just want you to be happy."

There's so much more at stake here than just our own happiness. That comes out in verses 15–16. These are considered some of the most difficult verses in the Bible to translate, but here's what

I understand these verses to be saying: "When you entered into the marriage covenant I made both of you one in body and spirit. Maintaining that oneness is essential not just for your relationship with me but for the raising up of children who know me. You may not think you're harming anybody but you're doing violence to the one I called you to protect." Research comparing children of divorced parents to children with married parents shows they suffer more academically, are more likely to be incarcerated for committing a crime, are more likely to engage in drug and alcohol use, as well as to be sexually active. Now this doesn't mean God's grace isn't available to divorced people or their kids. God hates divorce but he doesn't hate divorced people, and I've seen how God can put the pieces back together. We also know there are certain circumstances in which divorce is permissible. But the people Malachi was talking to were practicing easy, casual divorce, as so many do today. But, if you're married, think about the impact of your decisions on your kids. It's not just about staying together; it's about protecting and nurturing your marriage covenant.

Nehemiah built the walls around Jerusalem to protect the city against its enemies. Well, we have an enemy, too, and we should be building walls around our marriage. This week both men and women flocked to the movie theaters to see *Fifty Shades of Grey*. I haven't read the book or seen the movie, but I've read enough about both to know there's really nothing grey about it; it's all black. It was released for Valentine's Day, so we'll think it's a romance, but it's actually about a sick relationship filled with physical and emotional abuse. It seems glamorous, because the actors are attractive, own slick cars, and Beyonce is singing. But it's all a lie, and you should protect both your own marriage and your own children from it.

Withholding Tithes

Another area to evaluate is in the area of money and giving. That stands to reason, doesn't it? Many lovers' quarrels are about money. Over the years, this has been one of the harder things for my wife and I to talk about. Look at 3:8–10.

"Will a mere mortal rob God? Yet you rob me.

"But you ask, 'How are we robbing you?'"

"In tithes and offerings. You are under a curse—your whole nation—because you are robbing me. Bring the whole tithe into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house. Test me in this," says the Lord Almighty, "and see if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it."

The Israelites were commanded to tithe; to give a tenth of everything to the Lord. When they harvested their crops, one out of every ten sheaves was given to the Lord, straight off the top.

It gets a little more complicated because in the Old Testament law there were really three tithes. One was this tithe given to the priests. A second tithe was used to celebrate the annual

sacred feast. Then every third year the people would tithe for the poor. When you add that together, it works out to be about 25% of your income. That was expected of the people and God says: "You're robbing me! You're not following through on giving your tithes." In other words, "You're keeping something for yourself that belongs to me." The person making the tithe is saying, "I'm not the owner of all of this. It doesn't all belong to me. I'm just managing the resources of another. God is the owner and I'm giving to him what's already his." So the question isn't how much of your money you'll give to the Lord, but how much of his money you'll keep for yourself?

We have to ask ourselves: Is it still a sin not to bring tithes and offerings to God? This is the Old Testament. It deals with a phase of God's program before Jesus came on the scene. When Jesus came on the scene, some things changed. The way we relate to God in Christ is different in some respects than how the people of Israel related to God. We don't offer lambs on the altar; we eat baby back ribs. So we have to ask: Is this still an issue for us today? In the New Testament we're never commanded to tithe in the sense of giving a strict 10% of everything, although I still think it's a good place to start. I know many of you do that and I applaud that, but the New Testament doesn't tell us how much to give; it leaves the amount to us. The teaching of the New Testament is that because of all God has done for us through Christ, we're to give back to him.

Listen to just a few verses from the New Testament about giving:

2 Corinthians 8:7 says our giving is to be motivated by grace. ***"But since you excel in everything—in faith, in speech, in knowledge, in complete earnestness and in the love we have kindled in you—see that you also excel in this grace of giving."***

Matthew 6:3–4 says our giving is an issue between you and God. ***"But when you give to the needy, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your giving may be in secret."***

2 Corinthians 9:6 says our giving should be generous. ***"Remember this: Whoever sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and whoever sows generously will also reap generously."***

2 Corinthians 9:7 says our giving should be cheerful and free from compulsion. ***"Each of you should give what you have decided in your heart to give, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."***

1 Corinthians 16:1–2 says our giving should be both regular and proportional to our income. ***"On the first day of every week, each one of you should set aside a sum of money in keeping with your income..."***

1 Corinthians 9:11 says our giving should be directed towards those who spiritually feed us (our local church). ***"If we have sown spiritual seed among you, is it too much if we reap a material harvest from you?"***

We live in an expensive area. Many of you are struggling to make ends meet. The idea of giving anything close to 10% is scary. But God makes a challenge here to all of us, ***"Test me in this...and see***

if I will not throw open the floodgates of heaven and pour out so much blessing that there will not be room enough to store it." It sounds like the people are scared: if they follow through on their giving they're not going to make it. These people were facing heavy taxation by the Persians. I'm sure some of them thought, "Our budget is so tight. If we give our tithes and offerings we're not going to have enough money to pay our taxes."

God says to them: "Test me in this. If you do your part, I'll bless you. I'll open up the floodgates of heaven. You won't have room to store it all!" In the Old Testament the people's fortunes were tied to the land of Israel, so God's blessing them was related to what the land produced. But in the New Testament God's blessing shifts in its emphasis from material blessings to spiritual blessings. In Ephesians Paul speaks of the "boundless riches" we have in Christ. He says God has blessed us with every spiritual blessing. So if you make an extra \$20,000 this year, certainly that's a blessing from God. But if you lose \$20,000, that doesn't necessarily mean God didn't bless you. Maybe that blessing is going to be the birth of a healthy child. Or maybe that blessing is the privilege of leading someone to Christ. Or maybe it's those friendships you begin to build with people in your small group. Maybe it's the opportunity to go on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic or Honduras. It's still his blessing. God says: "I challenge you to give at a level that will test my ability to bless you. Try it and see if I come through." That's the question you and I have to ask: Am I willing to give at a level that will test God's ability to bless me? Some of us are giving, but not at that level. God is calling us in this lovers' quarrel to return to him in this matter of giving.

Evaluate your love relationship with God in these two areas: Is your love life being shaped by God's word? Are you cultivating and protecting your marriage? How's your giving? Are you giving God what belongs to him? Are you giving generously and sacrificially and regularly?

The good news is Jesus came to purify and wash us. I don't know about you, but I don't come out looking very good when I evaluate myself in light of these things. It's like I've just been slapped in the face twice. But it comforts me to know that Malachi also looks forward to a time when God will send Jesus. Look at chapter 3:1–2.

"I will send my messenger, who will prepare the way before me. Then suddenly the Lord you are seeking will come to his temple; the messenger of the covenant, whom you desire, will come," says the Lord Almighty.

But who can endure the day of his coming? Who can stand when he appears? For he will be like a refiner's fire or a launderer's soap.

Who's he talking about when he says, "The Lord you are seeking will come to his temple?" Clearly, it's Jesus. He came to the temple right after his birth. He came again right before his death. But when Jesus shows up, what will he be like? What will he do? Whatever it is, it's clear things won't stay the same. There are two images used here: First, he'll be like a refiner's fire. He *"will sit as a refiner and a purifier of silver..."* Notice it doesn't say Jesus will be like a forest fire or an incinerator's fire. Both of those destroy indiscriminately, violently. There's nothing left by the time the fire gets done. Many of us are afraid Jesus is like that. Once you let him into your life, he'll burn up everything and there will be nothing left of you. But that's not what he's like. God wants to change us, but he doesn't want to destroy us. A refiner's fire purifies. That's what Jesus does. He burns away all the impurities!

The second image is of Jesus as "launderer's soap." In our culture we have all kinds of soft, gentle, and sweet soaps, but launderer's soap wasn't like that; it was tough stuff. It's called "fuller's soap." It's used to wash the hands of blacksmiths or deep dirt out of stiff clothing. Malachi gives us this picture of Jesus: He's like a mother washing her family's clothing in a stream until everything is fresh and clean. He cleanses us deeply.

I'm so glad I have this picture of Jesus. It gives me hope! He's like the refiner's fire—hot, passionate, burning away all that's not gold in my life. He's like a launderer's soap—he takes me in his hands and plunges me into the soapy water, churning and turning until the dirt in my life is washed out. And what's the result? Look down at v. 17.

"On the day when I act," says the Lord Almighty, "they will be my treasured possession. I will spare them, just as a father has compassion and spares his son who serves him."

The result is I'm his treasured possession, a child of God.

How did Jesus do this? How does he purify us? How does he make us clean? How could we who are impure and filthy become his treasured possession? Only through the cross. On Wednesday we began 40 days of Lent. It's a good time to remember the work of redemption accomplished on the cross. Through the cross we're purified; through the cross we're washed. All we must do is obey the word we heard from Malachi, *"Return to me and I will return to you,"* says the Lord God Almighty. Ultimately, that's the final solution to this lover's quarrel between us and God.

This manuscript represents the bulk of what was preached at CPC. For further detail, please refer to the audio recording of this sermon.

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