



One of my favorite TV shows is *Hotel Impossible*. In a recent episode the star of the show, Anthony Mercurio, went to Mammoth, California to turn around the Alpenhof Lodge, a broken down and bankrupt hotel. There was a lot of work to do. The hotel needed updating, modernization and better cleaning. That was the physical part of the renovation. But there was another part of this renovation that had to happen if it was going to be successful: the family relationships had to be mended. Like many of the failing hotels on the show, this hotel was being run by one family and there was a lot of dysfunction that had grown over the years. Can you imagine working with your parents and siblings without clear communication or roles?

Bitterness, hard hearts and mistrust had settled in. At one point in the show, Anthony looked at the camera and said, "fixing this building is easy. But if I can't fix this family, everything else will be pointless." Anthony worked diligently on all of these areas and at the end of the experience, the buildings were in great shape and the family relationships had been restored. Apologies were made. Roles were clearly established. Pledges of new behavior were made. A full, well-rounded restoration had occurred. Often when I watch these shows I find my eyes a bit misty at this stage. I love seeing this!

The returned Israelites who are living in Jerusalem are facing similar restoration projects: a physical project and a relational project: the walls around Jerusalem needed to be rebuilt; their relationship with God needed to be rebuilt.

In the books of Ezra, Nehemiah and Malachi we read of these restoration projects. To help you understand how well the Israelites did during the 52 days of rebuilding the walls, I want to show you two impressive things the Israelites did. When they faced opposition, they prayed.

**But we prayed to our God and posted a guard day and night to meet this threat (Nehemiah 4:9).**

This is always a sign of being in a good place spiritually. Think about your life. When you're facing opposition—something bigger than you, something you can't control, something that's disrupting your plans—and your immediate response is to pray, you are living in a good spiritual zone. I like how Abraham Lincoln puts it: "I have been driven many times upon my knees by the overwhelming conviction that I had no where else to go. My own wisdom and that of all about me seemed insufficient for that day."

Surely each of us can relate to a time when we turned to God for help and a time when we were overwhelmed. That describes the people of Jerusalem during this time. And they turned to God. This is impressive and admirable.

After the temple was rebuilt and the wall around Jerusalem was rebuilt, the hearts of the people turned back to the Lord. Basically, a revival broke out!

**... all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the Lord had commanded for Israel.**

**So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand. He read it aloud from day-break till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law (Nehemiah 8:1-3).**

As the people stood there hearing God's Word read, chapter 8 goes on to describe how they became aware of how disobedient they had been to God. They wept for their sin; they repented of their sin; a fresh and an exciting wave of enthusiasm to live faithfully with God spread through the city.

This is impressive and admirable. The condition of their hearts was exactly what God wanted. God wanted followers who would put him first, who would worship him only, who would live in obedience to his commands. The people of Jerusalem were living God's way.

This was a great time for God's people. They've been resilient to complete their construction projects despite opposition and their hearts were turned toward God. Could it be that God's people have learned from generational mistakes? Are they now going to walk faithfully with God?

Sadly, no. Despite their good intentions, as they settled into the patterns of life, small compromises grew large and this generation showed themselves to be like previous generations. Spurts of faithfulness and long runs of rebellion. Andrew Carnegie, the US Steele tycoon said, "Compromise is usually a sign of weakness, or an admission of defeat. Strong men don't compromise, it is said, and principles should never be compromised."

Despite Carnegie's inspirational quote, each of us knows the sting of compromise. For example, despite how much resolve and dedication I possess, I will eat an entire sleeve of Thin Mint Girl Scout Cookies, or drink a Java Chip Frappachino with an added shot of espresso, or stay quiet when an natural opportunity to talk about Jesus comes up, or lash out in anger toward one of my kids, or ... you can come up with your own acts of compromise.

Despite strong resolve and good intentions, you know the weakness you possess; the anger that lives just below the surface; the desire for control that drives you; the lust that's always itching to be set loose; the fear of rejection that muzzles you.

Each of us is familiar with times of strong resolve and faithfulness and slides into compromise. That's what these Israelites were experiencing. Despite how well they did in rebuilding the wall and turning back to God, marital and financial compromises crept in among them. To call them back to faithfulness, God called Malachi, the last Old Testament prophet, to confront them. His message is the last message of the Old Testament to the people.

### **Marital and Financial Compromises**

**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 (Malachi 2:11-12).**

The men were messing up marriage. God describes marrying women who worship foreign gods as detestable. This act is repugnant, an abomination. God's holiness demanded that his people **only** marry people who worshipped him. The 1st Commandment instructed the people, "you should have no other gods before me." The 2nd Commandment instructed them, "do not make and then worship an image of a god."

Because of the primacy of the condition of a person's heart of devotion to God expressed in these verses, God later instructs the Israelites, "do not marry foreigners who worship other gods." The issue was not ethnicity or skin color; the issue was shared or different faiths. The Apostle Paul gives the same instruction in 2 Corinthians 6:14-16a, "***Do not be yoked together with unbelievers ... For we are the temple of the living God.***" The covenant of marriage is designed to be the most intimate connection a person has with someone else. This verse is reminding us that marrying an unbeliever, yoking yourself to someone who doesn't share your faith, doesn't work because there's an unequal yoking because a Christian is the temple of God.

I remember how vital this characteristic was as I waited and searched for a spouse. I only wanted to marry a woman who would share a heart of devotion to Jesus, just like me.

This can be a tough wait for some people. Many of my friends wanted to just be married, so they compromised on this issue. And it hasn't worked out well for any of them. I've seen young adults struggle with this temptation today as well. They want companionship so badly that they minimize how marrying someone of a different faith will effect them. 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!" If you're unmarried, evaluate this area of your life. If your children, nieces, nephews, cousins, friends are unmarried and open to marrying an unbeliever, speak up!

Back in Jerusalem, after time passed, the men were reaping the consequence of their bad decisions to marry women who didn't share their faith and they were divorcing their Israelite wives and marrying foreign wives.

**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 (Malachi 2:13-16).**

Notice that in verse 14 she is called his covenant partner. This is exactly what God said in Genesis 2 when he said the two will become one flesh. As verses 15 and 16 continue it describes the mysterious union of God fusing together the soul and body of two people who enter into a marriage covenant together. And this unbreakable union is not just for the happiness and personal fulfillment of the man and the woman. There's more at stake here. This relationship is for raising up children who will know God. Research comparing children of divorced parents to children with married parents shows:

- » Children in divorced homes are almost five times more likely to live in poverty than are children with married parents.
- » Teens from divorced homes are much more likely to engage in drug and alcohol use, as well as to be sexually active.
- » Children from divorced homes experience illness more frequently and recover from sickness more slowly.

What we see in this research is part of the reasoning behind God's disdain of easy, casual divorce: People get hurt. And God doesn't take it lightly when people he loves get hurt. Married people, are you on guard? If you're contemplating divorce, are you doing that based on what God says or what the world says? This is the first area of compromise God confronted the Israelites on. The second area concerns their offerings and tithes to him. The people were skimming on their tithes and offerings to the Lord.

**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.**

**"But you ask, 'How are we to return?'**

**"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 (Malachi 3:7-10).**

The Israelites were commanded to tithe. They were to give a tenth of everything to the Lord. When they harvested their crops, 1 out of every 10 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, another tithe was used to celebrate the annual sacred feast, then every third year the people would give another ten percent to help the poor. When you add that together, it works out to be about 25% of your income. That feels like a lot! When we pay our taxes, we feel the sting too. We can feel like we're losing something we own, losing something we need. And this mentality misrepresents the situation.

Years ago I was eating at a restaurant with my daughter. I was trying to get in better shape so I wasn't ordering bad food. I ordered a salad, Allie ordered chicken tenders and fries. I wanted some of those fries, just some. Not wanting to set her off by just taking a fry, I asked her if I could have a few.

She said "no, these are my fries."

I explained that I only wanted a few; she'd still have plenty. She still refused. She wanted all of her fries; a pretty typical interaction.

Consider what Allie was missing. I had the ability to buy myself an entire tableful of fries. I didn't really need hers. But it bothered me that she refused to give me a few because I was the person who provided the chicken tenders and fries to her in the first place.

I wasn't bothered about french fries. I was bothered on a much grander philosophical level – I was feeling the sting of her stinginess over an item I had given her. That stung. I was good enough to provide well for her. Below the surface was the question, Does she think I will stop providing for her? Does she think I'll eat so much that she'll go hungry? Does she doubt my goodness and my provision?

Fundamentally, this is an issue of trust. Did she trust that she'd be ok, even after I took a few? I was feeling what God feels when his people withhold tithes and offerings to him.

How does this apply to Christians today? Does God still want us to give him a tithe? When Jesus came on the scene, so many things changed. In the New Testament we're never commanded to tithe in the sense of giving a strict 10% of everything, although I still think this is 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** that 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."***

We have to answer the question: Am I willing to give at a level that will test God's ability to bless me? God is calling us to return to him in the matter of giving.

Like God has always done with his people, he called them to stop compromising and stop trying to get away with cutting corners. Through the prophet Malachi, he points out these two areas. He is calling us to live in obedience to him as well. 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.

As we come to the last sermon from the Old Testament, you might be wondering by now: Is there any hope for God's people to ever live faithfully? Is this cycle of rebellion and cutting corners destined to repeat itself with every new generation? Or is God going to introduce something new, **someone** new who will change the world forever?

The people then, just like people today, are not capable of walking faithfully with God on their own. The rebellion of Adam and Eve set sin loose and no amount of human resilience can resist its power. Of course, God knew this and we know it too. We've observed the cycle of rebellion to faithfulness repeat itself over and over again in the Old Testament. As you look at the entire Old Testament, it almost seems like nobody could do what God required. King David was a man after God's own heart, who also committed adultery and murder. Solomon, the wisest man who ever has or ever will live, married foreign women and his heart was turned away from God.

Nobody could do what God required. Compromises always slipped in. With this acknowledgment come a few options: lower the standard (lots of people do this), or live in despair (many people live with this pain). So God gives a message of unspeakable hope for Malachi to foreshadow.

Malachi 3:17 ... *the day when I act*

Malachi 4:1 ... *the day is coming*

Malachi 4:5 ... *I will send the prophet Elijah*

Luke 1:17 speaking about John the Baptist says ... *And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah ...*

**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 (Malachi 3:1).**

The Messiah will provide perfect righteousness to sinful people; the indwelling of the Holy Spirit will replace the outward anointing of the Holy Spirit; the kingdom of God will be seen as primarily spiritual instead of primarily physical. Malachi's message was unique because he was the last Old Testament messenger of God who pointed toward one more prophet, a prophet who would announce the Messiah—the Savior.

Malachi foreshadows all of this. We are able to experience it. When a person places their faith in Jesus the Bible says that the Spirit of God comes into them. Sinful people are given the righteousness of Jesus. The Spirit empowers us to live faithfully and bear the fruit of the Spirit. We are able to build God's spiritual kingdom. What the Israelites were longing for, what Malachi foreshadowed, we can experience and know.

Do you know this life? I'm so glad I have the presence of Jesus in my life. He gives me hope. He offers grace and second chances when I blow it. Do you know this life?

On Wednesday we began 40 days of Lent, 40 days leading up to the commemoration of Jesus dying on the cross and rising from the dead. It's a good time to remember the work of salvation accomplished on the cross. It's through this that we are offered the ultimate restoration. Through the cross we are purified; through the cross we are washed clean. Through the cross Jesus offers everything that's needed to rebuild our broken lives.

All we must do is return to the Lord and he will return to us.

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