

Breaking the faith, or keeping the faith?

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[0 : 00] And you're wondering why we're reading from the book of Malachi. We're actually in the middle of a series in the book.

And today, we're actually going to cover some pretty challenging territory, both at the level of understanding but also pastorally. And so I especially ask for your concentration and your patience this morning.

I think the outline that's in the bulletin will serve you very well as a guide. So do use that if that will help you. But what we really need is to pray. Let's pray.

Heavenly Father, your word is powerful enough to call the entire universe into existence. And your word is tender enough to heal the brokenhearted and the poor in spirit.

And so please, Lord, may your word both be full of power and full of tenderness this morning. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

[1 : 11] Well, as I've just said, we are currently spending six weeks in the book of Malachi. And today we've reached the halfway point. After all, it's just a short book. It's only four chapters. But what has really struck me is that despite its brevity, this portion of God's word is remarkably comprehensive.

Just think about it. We started by looking at God's electing love. As we look back to the time before we were even born. That was the first sermon in Malachi.

And then last week, Malachi touched on the area of formal religion and worship, encouraging us not to cheat God. And then over the next couple of weeks, he's going to talk about our public life, our working life, especially in the area of social injustice.

And then he's going to touch on the area of our finances. And then finally, having started by looking back, he's actually going to look forward to the day of the Lord.

The day of judgment. The day we will all one day face at the end of our lives. And so he really covers all the bases, doesn't he? From birth to death and beyond.

[2 : 22] And today, his focus is on the area of relationships. Especially the marriage relationship. Although I hope that by the end of the sermon, you will see that this is not just a passage for married couples.

And so if you're single today, don't tune out. But it means that I'll also be talking about potentially sensitive matters today. After all, in a congregation this size, we'll have all sorts of people.

We'll have single people and married people. We'll have people who wish they were married.

People who are happily married. And people who are unhappily married.

We will have a few among us today who are divorcees and who have experienced broken relationships. So I want to acknowledge that. And I want to say, please keep praying for me even right now.

Because I want to be wise and careful in how I say things. But what I want all of us to remember, whatever our situation, is to recall Malachi chapter 1 verses 1 to 2.

[3 : 25] Now how does Malachi begin this book? By giving us two truths. He tells us, number one, that the word of the Lord has come to his people.

And number two, God says, I have loved you. And so today as we look at Malachi chapter 2 verses 10 to 16. Remember that this is the authoritative word of the Lord himself.

Come to you. But remember also that this is the word of a God who loves you. And so this is the question that we're considering today. What does it look like to be faithful in the area of relationships?

Especially the marriage relationship. What does it mean to keep the faith in this area of life? After all, look at verse 10. And you can see that's the issue at hand.

Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us? Why do we profane the covenant of our ancestors by being unfaithful to one another?

[4 : 30] So that's the issue being introduced. Unfaithfulness to one another. Indeed, five times in today's passage, the word unfaithful, or if you have the older NIV, the phrase breaking faith, keeps popping up.

Now that's a little bit different from the last two weeks. You see, over the last two weeks, the issue has primarily been vertical. It's been mainly about our relationship with God.

How have you loved us, God? How have we shown contempt for your name? But this week, it seems to be more about the horizontal. That is, our relationships with one another.

But what I want you to realize, especially as we keep digging into this passage, is that you can't separate the horizontal from the vertical. You can't separate our relationship with each other from our relationship with God.

Why not? Well, let's look again at how God is described in this passage. That's important. Did you notice, first of all, that God is described as the creator? Let me read verse 10 again.

[5 : 39] Do we not all have one father? Did not one God create us? In other words, when it comes down to it, is there not ultimately one source for our existence?

Is there not just one divine designer who has shaped and molded this entire universe according to his grand design? And is not marriage also part of his grand design?

Now, come down with me to verse 15, and let me also draw your attention to the PowerPoint for a moment. Now, the Old Testament, if you didn't know, is originally written in Hebrew, and verse 15 is actually one of the hardest verses to translate.

And as you can see on the PowerPoint, our English translations can translate the verse quite differently. And the reason for that is because occasionally, it can be quite ambiguous in the Hebrew language whether something is the subject or the object of a sentence.

And so that's why you can see the two translations I put on the screen are not the same. But I am persuaded that the ESV translation is the one to go for in this case because it better suits the context.

[6 : 54] You see, marriage is going to be in focus throughout this passage. And so in verse 15, it would make more sense if Malachi is still talking about marriage as in the ESV rather than monotheism as in the NIV.

And notice in verse 15, he reminds us how God has designed marriage. Did he, that's God, not make them one with a portion of the Spirit in their union?

A husband and wives, not one flesh, joined together not merely by human laws and conventions, but by the Spirit of God creating a lifelong union?

You see, that's what marriage is. It's not a mere human invention, but a universal God-given pattern. Marriage is an exclusive covenant between one man and one woman, ordained and sealed by God, preceded by a public leaving of parents, consummated in sexual union, issuing in a permanently mutually supportive partnership, and normally crowned by the gift of children.

That's John Stott's helpful definition. And let me just make a few observations from this definition.

Marriage is exclusive, meaning that the husband and the wife are reserved for one another, and they shouldn't be any third party involved.

[8 : 23] Marriage is monogamous, meaning you only have one partner at a time. Marriage is permanent, meaning that it's for life, until death do us part.

And notice, marriage here is well defined, in the sense that we know exactly what the relationship is between the guy and the girl, as well as the relationship of the couple to the other members of their family and society.

And so to each other, their husband and wife, it's clear. And as a couple, they're a distinct social unit, you know, that they're husband and wife to each other, not to other people.

And they're a distinct social unit, even from their parents. And that is different, for example, from a long-term unmarried couple who cohabitates, where sometimes the relationship of the couple, are both between themselves, and between them and others, are still ill-defined.

You know, you look at such a couple, and you ask, you know, are they together together? Or are they not? If they're together, why are they not married? And then you ask, oh, what are the exact obligations of the couple to their parents, or the other way around?

[9 : 42] And so it's all fuzzy and ambiguous, and marriage removes that ambiguity. And so this expansive definition is captured beautifully in that phrase from the book of Genesis.

One flesh. Marriage is the one flesh relationship. Did God not make them one? Malachi asks. Is this not God's design? And so if you deliberately do anything to undo that one flesh relationship, you're telling the designer what you think of his creation.

And according to Christians, there is one more thing that a marriage is. It's also a reflection of the relationship between God and his people. Remember?

God chose them like a husband choosing his bride. An exclusive, permanent relationship. And he made a covenant with them like a husband making promises to his wife.

[10 : 50] And it's a covenant founded on grace, for it's a covenant founded on God's redemption of his people. And so that's why we said last week that cheating on God is like cheating on your spouse.

For that's how it works. But it also works the other way around. You see, breaking your vows to your spouse in the end is also breaking your vows to God.

Being unfaithful to one another is being unfaithful to God. And that's why in verse 10, Malachi says, the covenant of our ancestors, the covenant between God and his people has been violated.

And that's why in verse 11, Malachi says that Judah has been unfaithful. And so if someone were to look at these unfaithful, promise-breaking people, they would think, how can the God of such a people be a faithful, promise-keeping God?

The horizontal cannot be divorced from the vertical. And that's why God says such strong words here in today's passage. The state of our marriage relationships are never purely private affairs.

[12 : 05] as we'll soon see. But have all sorts of social and relational effects. Whether we realise it or not. We can't neatly compartmentalise our lives into the purely private and the purely public.

Or the religious and the non-religious all sealed off nicely from one another. It just doesn't work that way. And so today we're back to the question, what does it mean then to keep the faith in this area of life?

What does it look like? And God is going to show us two ways where to keep the faith. Firstly, keep the faith by who you choose.

Keep the faith by who you choose. Now notice what the men were doing at the end of verse 11.

They were marrying women who worshipped a foreign God. Now when we read this, the question immediately arises in many of our minds.

Why does the Bible seem to oppose marriage to a member of a different people group? Is the Bible banning interracial marriages? Is it racist?

[13 : 16] Some people are quick to conclude so. And yet when we peer a little closer, we realise that's absolutely not the case. Think of Ruth for instance. Her story is found closer to the beginning of the Old Testament.

Now Ruth is a Moabite, not an Israelite. And so she's a foreigner. But read her story and you'll soon find that she's fully accepted and included into the people of God.

And that a man of Israel, Boaz, marries her. And then even more amazingly, if we were to turn a few pages from Malachi to the next book in the Bible, to Matthew's Gospel, we find a genealogy tracing Jesus' ancestry.

And lo and behold, Ruth is there. And so clearly, race is not the issue here. Then what is the issue? Well, notice how verse 11 frames it.

It's not that the women were foreigners, but that the women worshipped a foreign god. The issue is not one of so-called racial purity, but of spiritual purity.

[14 : 27] Ruth, we read, was a Moabite who was already worshipping the God of Israel. Your people will be my people and your God will be my God, she famously tells her mother-in-law.

But the men here are marrying women who worship other gods. And so their loyalty and deepest allegiances are not to Yahweh, the God who has redeemed his people.

And so these women were actually bringing their worship of foreign gods into the most intimate human relationship of all at this point.

And think about it. Marriage is meant to be one flesh, one partnership, one union, one direction.

But, if you say God is your number one, and you marry someone who says another God is their number one, or at the very least your God is not their number one, well, what happens?

You're both being put in opposite directions. Now imagine if you have two boats together parked side by side, and you have one foot in each boat.

[15:43] but now the boats are being steered in opposite directions. What's going to happen to you? Either you have to put both your feet in one boat, or you fall into the water.

And what history shows again and again is that as the two boats, one steered by the God of Israel, Yahweh, and the other boat, steered by Baal or Asherah or some other foreign God, begins to move in opposite directions, which boat do the Israelite men get in?

The answer is that nine times out of ten, they don't get into Yahweh's boat. God knows that. And so what's happening here is that the worship of foreign gods isn't just being brought into the marriage relationship, but ultimately into the covenant community.

And so they have a corrupting effect on God's people overall. And so there is a public dimension to this, not just a private one. And so that's why the law sounds such a strong warning.

Here's Deuteronomy 7, verse 3 to 4. Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons. Why? For they will turn your children away from following me to serve other gods and the Lord's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you.

[17:16] It's spiritual, not racial. And notice the result of such marriages. Look at verse 11 again. A detestable thing has been committed to Israel and in Jerusalem.

Judah has desecrated the sanctuary the Lord loves. And so here is the temple, the center of worship, the axis of God's presence, the symbol of God's love.

For it's where God dwells with his people and enters into relationship with them. But when they married women who worship foreign gods, what were they really saying?

They were saying, God's redemption isn't such a big deal to me. In the end, it doesn't really matter which god you worship. Yahweh is just one option amongst many.

It doesn't really matter if I worship this god and my wife goes and worship another god, they're all roughly the same anyway. And so they were profaning the temple and all that it stood for.

[18:22] They were no longer being distinctive, they were just another nation with just another god. One of many. You know, at best, God's just another village god to them, not the creator god of the entire universe, the one who gave existence to them.

And so in other words, they've made God something less than he really is. So they're being unfaithful. Now the people who were chasing after these girls probably didn't have any of that in mind.

They were probably just thinking, ooh, a pretty girl. But the consequences are serious. In verse 12, such a person would be removed from the tents of Jacob, which is another way of saying that he would be cut off from the covenant blessings.

Who you choose to marry is a very big deal. Now how does this work today? Remember that Malachi is in the Old Testament, pre-Jesus, but we live post-Jesus in light of the revealed gospel. And so that means we have to be careful in our application. There will be some ways in which the New Testament affirms more or less exactly what is being said here, and other ways in which the New Testament modifies it.

[19:50] So let me try to draw these out. How should we apply this? Well, here's the big application. Don't pursue non-Christians.

Don't pursue non-Christians. You see, today we are still God's covenant people. We are now under a new covenant, sealed by Jesus' blood.

But just like the people of Malachi's day, the thing that binds God's people together is ultimately not ethnicity. There is neither Jew nor Gentile, but we are all one in Christ Jesus.

And so it is the Lord Jesus who unites us together. And so our calling is to be faithful to the Lord Jesus. And we reflect the level of our faith by who we choose to marry.

And so today, if you are single, you keep the faith by who you choose. another believer. 2 Corinthians chapter 6 verse 14 says, do not be yoked with another unbeliever.

[21:01] And in the wider context of that verse, Paul is talking more generally about idolatrous partnerships, not marriage relationships specifically, but the principle still seems to apply.

And so don't pursue non-Christians. or let's state this application more positively. Don't pursue non-Christians, but if you marry, marry someone who loves Jesus.

Marry someone who is passionate about Jesus. You see, if you love Jesus, that's just common sense, isn't it? If you're a Christian, you're declaring that Jesus is your first love.

So why would you marry someone who doesn't share that same passion? unless perhaps Jesus isn't your first love after all?

And if the Bible says, marry a Christian, then the logic is don't go out with a non-Christian, don't date a non-Christian. It's unfair to the other person.

[22 : 10] If you go out with them knowing that there is virtually zero possibility of you getting married to them, we shouldn't adopt the world's idea of dating, after all, where it's all just play-play, you know, we're just playing around, no intention of getting married, no thought about it.

Now, I just want to be very careful here. There is nowhere in the Bible that explicitly says dating a non-Christian is a sin. Nowhere. But it does clearly point in the direction of it being unwise.

And I know that there are people here in our congregation where you've done that. You've gone out with a non-Christian and you've actually had a happy ending, you know, he or she became a Christian and you ended up marrying.

Now, praise God for that. If that's you, we praise God for that. But really, if that's you, you also need to thank God for his mercy.

because nine times out of ten, it doesn't happen that way. If anyone gets converted, usually it's the Christian who leaves the faith.

[23 : 20] That's the testimony of the Bible, that's the testimony of church history, and that's the testimony of my experience as a pastor. And for those of us who are single, but wish to be married, well, that's tough.

you know it. It limits your pool somewhat. And I know you might feel the pressure, you know, you feel the pressure from your parents, your parents say, ah, that's a nice girl, why don't you go after her?

You feel the pressure from the surrounding culture, which celebrates interfaith marriages on the assumption that it doesn't matter which God you worship. And so the temptation is great when you meet a lovely man or a lovely woman who's not a Christian.

I know there are plenty of non-Christian people out there who frankly speaking are probably nicer and have better character than some professing Christians. But ask yourself, can this relationship truly honour God?

Can it show faithfulness? If under all that niceness, Jesus is not this person's number one, how is it going to work? You see, the way we think about our work, our use of money, our time, how we're going to raise our kids in the future, it's not going to be the same if I truly follow Jesus.

[24 : 41] How is it going to work? But there are some of you here today who might already be married to non-Christians.

And so the question is, what about me? What am I to do? Well, the New Testament provides further instruction. Should you separate from them?

1 Corinthians chapter 7 verse 12 to 16 provides us with the basic answer. No, you shouldn't. If you're married to an unbeliever, aim to stay married.

We won't have the time to read it all here today, but 1 Corinthians tells us that you should stay with your non-Christian spouse and not divorce him or her. And just like an unbelieving wife in Malachi's day might cause her to win her husband over to her God, now as a believing wife, you might by your life win your unbelieving husband to Christ.

And it works for husbands and wives in the other way around as well. Well, that is your calling now. And what if you're the non-Christian spouse married to a Christian and you're sitting in here and hearing all this today?

[26 : 04] Now, this might sound a little bit offensive to you, but what I want you to know is this is how seriously God regards his relationship with you.

It's above even marriage. For God is calling your spouse to put him above even you so that you would too.

you see, Christianity is not just an optional religion. It's a declaration that there really is only one creator God, that we all have dishonoured and disobeyed him, that there is consequences, but God has pursued reconciliation in Jesus through his death on the cross.

And so there's a decision to be made. Do you want to be reconciled to God through Jesus? This is the message of Christianity and it's the message that all Christians are to bear witness to, including

your Christian spouse.

And so the prayer is that your spouse is showing what a life-transforming message the gospel is through his or her conduct towards you. That's what it's all about.

[27 : 19] But we need to come back to Malachi and to the second way we are to keep the faith. Secondly, keep the faith to who you choose. Keep the faith to who you choose.

In verse 13, we discover that the people are puzzled and upset because their worship has been rejected. And so verse 14, they ask, why? That's their pushback. And God answers verse 14, 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. You've made a promise to another person, you've declared that you will be one flesh with her, and you've broken it.

In fact, given how rampant divorce seems to be in Malachi's day, God is justified in saying, you've normalized it. And some commentators even suggest that the foreign marriages and the divorce rate go together.

The man might have been spotting someone attractive, they were saying, ooh, I want her instead, and so they divorced their wives without any thought and just went after the other girl.

[28 : 33] Now, that's certainly possible, although it's not clearly mentioned in the text. But the point is, divorce is damaging.

In verse 16, and I'm following the NIV 2011 translation here on the screen, I know the older NIV puts it in a different way, and you can ask me more about that later if you want. But the divorce is like doing violence to your spouse.

That's why God hates divorce. That's how bad it is. And divorce doesn't just have harmful effects on the two parties themselves. Once again, there is a public dimension to it.

if you look back at verse 15, notice what does God expect marriages to produce in verse 15? Godly offspring.

That was the original design for Adam and Eve to have children who would fill the earth with the glory of God. But after the fall, in the Old Testament, offspring isn't just about reproduction.

[29 : 39] No, offspring has to do with God's big salvation plan. offspring has to do with God's big promises. You see, back in Genesis 17, God had already promised Abraham that he would be the father of many nations and his would be a kingly line.

And if you go further back to Genesis 3, you can see that God has promised Adam that one day, one of his offspring will crush Satan and reverse the effects of sin.

And so offspring is important because the line of Abraham and David is going to be crucial in God's eventual redemption of the world. It's crucial for the coming of Jesus.

But if everyone is engaged in divorce, well, you're reducing the chance of bearing godly offspring, offspring who will come through this line, offspring who will carry on God's plan.

And so divorce has very public ramifications. It has consequences that go far beyond just damaging the marriage relationship in Malachi's day. It's threatening God's redemptive purposes.

[30 : 52] And by normalizing divorce, the people were essentially saying to God, even if they didn't actually realize it, well, who cares about your original purposes for the world?

Who cares about your salvation plan? all they were thinking was about their own desire for that pretty girl. Now, what does that mean for us today?

Here, once again, we must remember that Malachi is not the sum total of everything that the Bible teaches about marriage and divorce.

Malachi is simply addressing the situation of his day. And he does show us that we should hate divorce like we hate all sin. We should look to strengthen our marriages so that we never ever have to come to this point.

But I just want to acknowledge that amongst us this morning, there will be a couple of you who have experienced the pain of divorce. And you're wondering, what about me?

[31 : 59] Have I done wrong? What does God think? God think? And so we need to look at the rest of the Bible to get the whole picture. And if we were to turn to Matthew 19, Jesus indeed affirms that in God's design, marriage is monogamous, lifelong, and exclusive.

But at the same time, he recognizes that we live in a fallen world. And so where there is adultery involved, divorce is permitted. You can look it up.

Now notice, it's not encouraged. It's not celebrated. It's an occasion for much grief. It's not a decision to be made lightly.

In fact, it's something of a last resort. Repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation is always the ideal.

But if it does occur, it is permitted. And 1 Corinthians 7 teaches that if a non-Christian spouse decides to abandon and divorce the Christian spouse, then let it be.

[33 : 13] Those are two exceptions. Now this is a very big topic, and later this year, we'll spend some time in Matthew's Gospel, and we'll be looking at another passage in Matthew, not this one, but another one, that will touch again on the question of divorce.

And so there will be more opportunity to hear teaching about this later on in the year. But today, if your heart is heavy because you're living with the reality of divorce, well I just want to point out a number of things to you.

What God is really interested in is your heart. That was the real problem with the people in Malachi's day. You see, divorce was the surface issue, but deep down it was about their heart. Quite simply, they weren't bothered about what God said. They didn't care much about his design or his plan. In fact, they were so down to the things of God that they didn't even know why their offerings were not acceptable.

And so what God is after right now is your heart. God is distressed because of your past sin and you want to make things right with God, well that is a good sign.

[34 : 31] That is different from the people in Malachi's day. And God has already provided an offering for you that is acceptable in his sight.

He's called Jesus. And so if you're a divorcee today, however that happened, know that grace is available today. What's done is done, but Jesus can redeem the broken pieces of your life.

And so hang on to him, hang on to his forgiveness, hang on to his word. And if you need to chat more to me about that, please feel free to come and find me.

But for all of us, take seriously God's call. Keep the faith to who you choose. Keep the faith to whom you marry.

In Malachi, remember the people were not divorcing because of adultery and abandonment. No. And so what they were doing was simply wrong. And recognize the harm that divorce creates.

[35 : 41] Now it doesn't quite create harm in quite the same way as in Malachi's day because God's salvation plan has already been fulfilled in Jesus. The godly offspring has already culminated in Jesus, the son of Abraham, coming to rescue us.

But know that divorce still has consequences that go far beyond just the two parties. Children get hurt, communities get divided, and God's reputation is damaged.

And if you are not married today, but you have an opportunity to, well, take that very seriously.

Verse 14 says, the Lord is the witness to your covenant.

And so as we finish up, I just want to make a number of broader applications that I think also arises from this passage. Firstly, this passage reminds us that it's never wise to compartmentalize our relational life from our devotional life.

And what I mean by that is that your relationship with God and your relationship with each other are connected. How we're doing with God will overflow sooner or later into other areas of your life.

[36 : 53] So if there hasn't been any relationship with God for a while, it's going to show up in the way that you treat others. That's a very sobering truth to me.

And similarly, if you're being unfaithful in your relationships, you can't be faithful to God. You can't think that your worship on Sunday is unaffected by what you do on a Wednesday.

Remember, worship is about all of our lives offered to God. You can't divide marriage or friendships or any other relationships and say that that is off-limits to God.

He wants all of your life to be offered to him in worship. Secondly, this passage reminds us that our distinctiveness as God's people matters.

God wants his people to stand out as his representatives including in the area of marriage and sexual ethics. That's what Malachi was concerned about. Certainly in New Testament times, in the Roman world, sex with prostitutes, concubines, and even young boys were considered normal.

[38 : 07] And it was sometimes even thought of as a preventative measure from someone having sex with another man's wife. So their thinking was that, oh, if you go and have sex with the prostitute, then you won't go and chase after another person's spouse.

But the New Testament teaching turns that completely upside down, saying that all that is out of bounds. Marriage is between a husband and a wife. And in an era where men could be considered as owning women's bodies, but not the other way around, the teaching of the New Testament that both husband and wife have valid sexual claims on each other was nothing short of revolutionary. By simply being distinct, they changed the world. They showed God's design as something beautiful. And in a world where people talk about serial monogamy and broken marriage relationships are a plenty, well, we have a chance to show God's design as something beautiful. Finally, this passage reminds us that God is still good and faithful. Why does he talk about all of this here?

It's because he wants to protect the innocent victim, those who have been unfairly divorced and treated. If that's you, God is for you.

[39 : 38] And he wants to keep his promises to ensure that the godliest offspring of all would one day come to earth to save his people. And he did so even amidst the unfaithfulness of his people.

For Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, cleansing her by the washing with water through the word, presenting her to himself as a radiant church, holy and blameless.

And as that radiant church, he is clear in what he wants us to do. Verse 16, be on your guard and do not be unfaithful.

Be on your guard and do not be unfaithful. Let's pray. Psalm 33, verse 4 says, For the word of the Lord is right and true.

He is faithful in all he does. The Lord loves righteousness and justice. The earth is full of his unfailing love. And so, Lord, let us hear your word as right and true today.

[40 : 52] And help us to see you as ever faithful. And we pray, Lord, that today, as we behold who you are once again, that that will lead us to be people who keep the faith by who we choose and to who we choose.

I pray, Lord, that you would grant wisdom to us today. For those in danger of making foolish choices, pull them back. For those in danger of giving in to temptation, pull them back.

For those in danger of being indifferent, to your purposes and design, call them back. And be especially close today to those who are brokenhearted and who know the pain of divorce.

Help them and see that you are for them. And may we continue to be distinctive as your bride and stay faithful to you. All this we pray in the name of Jesus.

Amen. Well, let's continue to pray.