

Going through the motions, or giving our very best?

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Preacher: Brian King

- [0 : 00] One of our core values is to be driven by God's Word, and that means that we often do expository preaching in our church.
- That means we're working through the Bible, book by book, passage by passage. And we are now currently in a six-week series in the Book of Malachi, and this is week number two. If you need help, there's also an outline in your bulletin that will help you to follow along.
- But the most important thing is to keep the Bible open in front of you. Let's pray. Heavenly Father, we do thank you that every word of Malachi is breathed out by you and useful for teaching, correcting, rebuking, and training in righteousness.
- May it have that effect for which you intended it today. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen. Now, if there's one thing that I'm quite sure we all hate, it's that feeling of being cheated, isn't it?
- Perhaps you're hoping to remodel your living room. And the contractor comes in, he looks around, and then he gives you his quote, and it sure sounds good. But after doing a little bit of tearing down, they'll tell you that actually their initial assessment isn't quite on the mark.
- [1 : 14] Because, you know, your living room needed a little bit more work. It actually has stuff that you had done to it that wasn't so good. And, you know, you didn't maintain so well. So could you please pay up a little bit more?
- Upfront deposit is the best. And then before you know it, the work keeps getting delayed. He keeps going outstation. And finally, when you discover that when everything is finished, nine months after the initial deadline, your towels feel funny.
- Your dimensions don't quite match. Your living room isn't quite as cozy as before. But the contractor is now uncontactable. And you've got that sinking, raging feeling.
- And sometimes we feel even more infuriated if the cheating is blatant and unashamed, don't we? Perhaps that's how some of us feel about the whole 1MDB saga.
- Just this week, I was listening to some teachers tell stories about some of the silliest ways their students tried to cheat. One student was giving an oral presentation.
- [2 : 21] And it soon became clear that he had literally printed the entire Wikipedia entry on his given subject and was simply reading it out. The dead giveaway was when he read out, The cover art shows much more detail.
- See picture above. At which point he stopped, embarrassed as the entire class burst out laughing. Another student copied his friend's homework, so much so that he even copied his classmate's name.
- Their attempts to cheat were pathetic. And the teachers would have felt even more insulted if it wasn't so funny. The shocking thing about today's passage is that God's people were trying to cheat God.

And it isn't funny. Just glance down at verse 14. Cursed is the cheat, God says. He calls them out.

He names what they're doing. He says they're cheating him. He isn't food. Of course he isn't. He's God. And any attempt to cheat God is by definition insulting.

[3 : 39] Pathetic. But the shocking thing is God's people thought they could. What were they doing? They said to each other, Let's just look busy enough to impress God.

Let's give him enough religion to make him feel good. Last week, we said that Malachi was a magnifying glass. And here, he helps us magnify a way of thinking that could so easily infect God's people, both then and now.

In today's passage, Malachi shows that we can look like we're worshipping God. We can even think we're worshipping God. But in reality, we're actually cheating him.

And just imagine how God feels about all this. You see, we sometimes forget that God isn't like Disney or Sony.

Disney and Sony are big, powerful and impersonal corporations. And because they are big and powerful and impersonal, sometimes we might justify downloading a pirated Disney show or buying a knockoff Sony product by saying, Hey, hey, they're already so rich anyway.

[4 : 58] And it's not like they really know or care about me here in Kuching, right? So this isn't really cheating, right? And similarly, we could say, Hey, it's not really cheating if God is so big and he doesn't need me, right?

So he doesn't really care that much about me, right? He doesn't care about what I do. But that's a mistake. God isn't like Sony or Disney.

He's not a cold and impersonal thing you're simply trying to squeeze a few cents out of. Cheating on God is more like cheating on your spouse.

Remember God's word to Israel last week? I have loved you. And he's proven it. When they've been unfaithful, he's remained on speaking terms with them.

When they've been fearful, he's reminded them, he's secured their future against their enemy. You see, Israel is the privileged one.

[6 : 02] When you get married, you're saying to the other person, I choose you. Out of everybody, it's to you I'm going to reveal things about myself that no one else knows.

And in the Old Testament, out of all the peoples in the whole wide world, Israel alone is the one to whom God has revealed himself to.

He chooses them. He made known his personal name to them. And in revealing his name, God isn't just telling Israel what to call him.

You know, don't call me Mr. God, just call me Yahweh. No, no, no. In the Old Testament, the name of God is bound up with his character, with his majesty, with his glory.

It's the essence of his identity. And by revealing his name to Israel, he's making it possible for people to call upon his name.

[7 : 06] In other words, he's giving them unparalleled access to him. What a wonderful privilege they had. God says, I have loved you.

And so what a gut punch it must be to discover that they're abusing this privilege and cheating God. But how exactly have they tried to cheat God?

What happens when they try to cheat God? And really, what should they have done instead of trying to cheat God? Well, those are exactly the questions we want to explore this morning.

We do so, so that we won't repeat the mistakes of Israel, and so that we would repent if we are indeed already following in their footsteps this morning.

So what happens if we try to cheat God? Let's find out. Make sure Malachi 1 verse 6 onwards is in front of you. So first question, how might we try to cheat God?

[8 : 08] Verse 6 highlights the basic problem. A son honors his father and a slave his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due to me?

If I am a master, where is the respect due to me? Says the Lord Almighty. It is you, priests, who show contempt for my name. Last week, you might remember, I said that Malachi is made up of six disputations.

And each disputation tends to take the same form. Introduction of issue, pushback, and then God's answer. So here in verse 6, the issue is introduced.

The Lord says, let's look at the world. In general, regardless of culture, sons honor their fathers. Servants honor their masters.

Students honor their teachers. Patients honor their doctors. When we think that someone has done something of great value, when we believe that the person is considerably worthy, we honor them.

[9 : 20] That's what many people did with Dr. Lee, the guy who was the whistleblower in the COVID-19 coronavirus. They honored him. That's how our world works.

But God asks, if that is true of how you treat people in general, how is it that this doesn't seem to be true of me?

If I'm a father, where is the honor due to me? If I'm a master, where is the respect due to me? If you honor worthy humans, how much more should you honor God himself?

And remember, this isn't the voice of a cruel tyrant demanding admiration. It's the voice of our Creator, our Redeemer, grieving His people's negligence.

they've shown contempt of Him. And so that's the issue. But here comes the pushback, verse 6 again. But you ask, how have we shown contempt for your name?

[10 : 29] The priest asks, God, your criticism's a little vague. It's not concrete. It's not substantial. Show us, how exactly have we done anything wrong?

It's a little ironic, isn't it, that in asking how they are showing contempt, you can't help but detect a note of contempt already.

You say, we've done wrong? Okay, God, indulges. How so? They sound a bit like the teenager who tells his mother, what do you mean I'm being rude?

How so? And God answers. He says, look here, it's pretty obvious.

Verse 7, by offering defiled food on the altar. Here is objective evidence. This isn't God being petty.

[11 : 26] The law is pretty clear that defiled food is unfit for God. But they gave it to God anyway. It's as if you're at home on a Saturday night and you open the fridge and suddenly an overpowering stench hits you and you cry out, honey, what in the world is that?

And you look in and you see some leftover kolomi. It looks like it has a dark moldy green texture to it rather than yellow. And the chasio looks like it's grown legs or something.

And both of you look at each other and you say, and your wife asks rather, well what are you going to do about that? And you reply, oh, I know.

Let's bring it to church and put it in the offering bag tomorrow. We'll buy ourselves another kolomi from Oriental Park for breakfast but let's give this one to the Lord. He'll love it.

That's what was happening. You see, notice that it wasn't that they weren't offering any food.

[12 : 35] They did. They're doing religion. They're going through the motions. But it was all show. It was like, okay, what are we supposed to do tomorrow?

Oh, offer some food. That's what God wants, right? Okay, okay, done, done, done. This one good enough. You see, religion becomes merely about appeasing God week after week.

God was never really part of their lives, which is why they only thought about Him when they were looking in the fridge late on Saturday night. And by offering defiled food, polluted food, they're basically telling God, that's what you're like.

Polluted beings accept polluted food. Or to change the picture slightly, they were like vulgar guests who did not hesitate to insult their hosts.

Imagine the pot blessed where you bring that same kolomi. You're showing contempt for the hosts and the other guests, aren't you? But that's what they were doing.

[13 : 45] No wonder, verse 7 again, God says that they think the Lord's table is contemptible. God's the host, but they obviously despise His pot blessed.

And this whatever attitude carried through in their sacrifices as well. Verse 8 shows us that they were offering blind and lame and diseased animals.

God's word clearly told them that it was forbidden to do so. Deuteronomy 15, verse 21, for example, says that if an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the Lord your God.

Yet it's obvious they didn't take it seriously at all. Again, the idea seems to be, oh, let's look at our animals. Which one's good? Which one's not so good?

Well, let's keep the good ones and let's give our leftovers to God. I know his word says this, but you know, he wouldn't mind, right? After all, we're still worshipping him, aren't we?

[14 : 57] We'll just worship him in our way. So you see, they were indeed going through the motions. They were theoretically bringing their offerings and sacrifices.

But there was absolutely no heart in what they did. There was no love in what they did. There was no honour in what they did. They were technically worshipping, but in no real sense of the word could what they were really doing be called worship.

What is worship? The theologian Don Carson has a 16-line definition, but I'll just give you the basic gist. worship, he says, is the proper response of all creatures to God, ascribing all honour and worth to our Creator, precisely because he is delightfully worthy.

Let me say that again. Worship is the proper response of all creatures to God, ascribing all honour and worth to our Creator, precisely because he is delightfully worthy.

And how do you know if you're ascribing actual honour and worth to someone? It's shown in what you give them. It's shown in what you're prepared to shower them with.

[16 : 29] And if you're showering your God with blind and lame animals, well, that shows what you really think about him, doesn't it? Once again, it's contempt.

The word Malachi uses over and over again in verses 6 and 7 and 12. But here is the real question for us today.

What about you? What about me? What are you giving God? Is it your best? Or is it your leftovers?

Is it the leftovers of your time? Hmm, God, okay, I've already worked out my Netflix time, Instagram time, my nap time, my gym time.

Ah, okay, here's the rest of my share. The leftovers. Now, don't get me wrong. Giving God your time is not necessarily equivalent to time spent in a church setting.

[17 : 33] That's the mistake we often make in our thinking. Being in church 10 hours a week is not necessarily equivalent to giving God 10 hours a week.

God's people here could have been spending plenty of time at the temple, but their heart was not there. And so their time was not actually given to God, although their physical presence was.

And so the real question is, are you using your time intentionally? In a way where you're still telling God, your glory is my priority?

That's giving God what he deserves. The people here were simply giving God their leftovers, what they didn't need or want. Everything else was for their own selfish need.

What about us? If we're watching Netflix, for instance, are we still putting God as number one in our lives? If we watch Netflix because we know that we are creatures who need rest and downtime, and who know that God does indeed give recreation time and artistic shows for us to enjoy, that's worship.

[18 : 53] If we watch Netflix with no consideration of whether we're consuming edifying content or not, and approaching it simply as time spent on me, myself, and I, and no one else can interrupt it, that's not worship.

If we're giving time to church because we genuinely want to help out and serve in various ministries, that's worship. If we're giving time to church simply because we're forced to, that's not worship.

worship. And it's the same in all other parts of our life as well. Are you giving God the leftovers of your money?

Malachi will say more about that in chapter 3. What about your gifts and abilities, your resources? What does your use of them show what you think God is worth?

Do you think God is worthy of them at all? Or does your use of them actually show contempt for Him? And remember it is God who determines the pattern of our worship.

[20 : 09] God's people here thought I'll just worship the way I like to worship God. It's all about how I feel, whether it's authentic to me. If I feel like bringing this kind of animal or offering that kind of food, who are you to judge me?

And so if I spend my time in this way, or use my talent in that way, who are you to judge me? That's my worship. But Malachi makes plain here that we are not free to worship however we like.

Romans chapter 12 verse 1 makes clear that worship is about the offering of our entire bodies, our entire lives. And worship doesn't necessarily involve service and sacrifice.

Although time spent in church is not necessarily equivalent to giving God your time, it is also true that worshipping God would definitely involve spending time with your brothers and sisters in Christ, serving each other, encouraging each other, and building each other up.

That's what church is all about. And so not following what his word says about these things, it's also evidence about what we really think about God.

[21 : 30] So, are you trying to cheat God? Do you think he's satisfied with the leftovers? Well, notice how God labels this kind of actions.

Verse 8, when you offer blind animals for sacrifices, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong?

Try offering them to your governor. You see, the Hebrew word here is actually ra'ah, and so the ESV translation captures it more literally. Is that not evil?

Try offering such things to your governor. We would never bring moldy, leftover colony to a human leader. As mere sinful mortals, we will not treat other mere sinful mortals like that.

So, how is it that as a mere sinful mortal, we dare to come before the holy, majestic God and treat him so casually?

[22 : 42] It's wrong. It's evil. It's not that we have nothing to give him, it's that we give him rubbish. But that's not all.

Look at verses 12 and 13. But you profane it by saying the Lord's table is defiled and its food is contemptible, and you say, what a burden, and you sniff at it contemptuously, says the Lord Almighty.

You see, the priests are particularly culpable. They're the ones who administer the sacrifices, they're the ones instructing God's people, but clearly they don't really care much.

They're turning a blind eye to the kind of sacrifices God's people were offering. And what was their attitude? They were saying, why God so much complain, one?

Why is he so demanding? They felt the sacrificial system was worrisome. I have to go and organize the animals, get ready the incense again, have to go and do the teaching again.

[23 : 53] On the surface, they perform their duties. There's a lot of religion going on here. If this was church today, they would have done all the necessary things.

The Bible readings, the singing, the praying, the preaching, the ushering, the refreshments. But it was tiresome to them.

The priests had no appreciation of the significance of what they were actually doing. After all, don't forget, no sacrificial system, no relationship with God.

No sacrificial system, no chance of approaching God. the sacrificial system was actually a token of God's love to them.

But all they could think of was, what a burden. And so the question is, are we in danger of the same attitude?

[24 : 54] I have to serve in Sunday school again, prepare yet another lesson. I have ushering again, another time of training and instruction ah, I've already been doing this for 25 years, I've done my deal.

What about others? Okay then, what's the bare minimum I can get away with? my friends, if we think this way, then we need to ask, what's going on in my relationship with God?

Because it's clearly gone off. If Jesus was your first love before, then you have forgotten your first love. You've forgotten the significance of what Christ has done for us, of the enormity of his sacrifice.

And you know you've forgotten when you're given the opportunity to gratefully respond to the gospel, to teach the gospel, to serve the gospel, to live in light of the gospel, and all you can think of is what a burden.

For when our relationship with Jesus is alive and well, we would not think of our service like a PTPTN loan. Okay, I've spent 15 years paying off my debt.

[26 : 16] Now I'm free. I'm going to sit back, relax, go and do my own thing. I'll just let others go and pay their own debt. My friends, serving Jesus is a privilege.

For serving Jesus is loving Jesus. If we have no Jesus, we have no relationship with God. we have no experience of his love.

But because he said, I have loved you and proved it with his actions, well, we want to say back, I love you too and prove it with our actions.

And so would you serve the one who gave his all for you with love and gratitude? or would you serve him with grumbles and moaning? Here you go, God.

I know I can give you better, but just be satisfied with my leftovers, my devout food, my lame animals. That's the gist of verse 14.

[27 : 22] You go through the motions, but you're certainly not giving him complete devotion. But God can't be cheated. He's never pleased with just outward forms.

Look at verse 9. Now plead with God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you, says the Lord Almighty?

How can you even dare ask for my blessing when you show such contempt for me? The Lord asks. And so if this is our attitude this morning, then we need to repent.

It's sin, plain and simple. But more than that, we need to plead with the Lord Jesus to let us gaze upon his beauty again. If we've forgotten our first love, then we need to see his grace afresh, to grab hold of his love again, and to be astounded by his mercy.

We need to plead with him to revitalize our relationship with him so that our hearts may be transformed, and so that we will seek to please him, not cheat him.

[28 : 36] For what happens when we try to cheat God? That's our second question. How does God respond to such attempts to cheat him? Look at verse 10.

Do you see what God is really saying?

Close the temple doors. In other words, deny access to my presence. Remove the means of atonement. after all the sacrifices you offer are already useless, God tells his people.

They have no effect. They're not in line with my word because the animals are profoundly imperfect. And so in effect, God is saying, I would rather have no worship than false and pretentious worship.

For God's people were acting in a way that was an embarrassment to God. God's love. Just imagine if during this time an unbeliever came in and saw the food and animals being offered.

[29 : 50] And just imagine if an unbeliever spent time amongst us for a few months and observed our service and lifestyles. What would he conclude?

Would he conclude that we think God's name is great? Or would he think otherwise? Would we actually be an embarrassment to God? And that's what we need to consider.

For that is the contrast Malachi is drawing in verse 11. My name will be great among the nations from where the sun rises to where it sets.

In every place, incense and pure offerings will be brought to me because my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord Almighty. And Malachi is looking ahead to a future time when all the nations will worship God and contrasting that with the corrupt worship of his people.

And he says, that shouldn't be the way. If my name is going to be great among all the nations, shouldn't it be great among you, my people?

[30 : 58] And it's the priests in particular who have to bear responsibility. As the leaders of God's community, they are the lead worshippers, so to speak, and they are the lead teachers.

Look at 2 verse 7. For the lips of a priest ought to preserve knowledge, because he is the messenger of the Lord Almighty, and people seek instruction from his mouth.

And so they are the ones who would especially bear the consequences of God's people going wayward. Look at 2 verse 2. If you do not listen, and if you do not resolve to honour my name, says the Lord Almighty, to the priest, I will send a curse on you, and I will curse your blessings.

Yes, I have already cursed them, because you have not resolved to honour me. If this kind of worship continues amongst God's people, God says, and you don't teach them, you don't warn them, you don't lead the way, then your very calling becomes corrupted.

You see, one of the things that the priest did was to pronounce blessing upon God's people. They were meant to pray that famous prayer of Aaron, the Lord bless you and keep you, the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you, the Lord turn his face to you and give you peace.

[32 : 19] But when God says, I will curse your blessing, he's saying that these become but mere words. The reality is that God cannot make his face shine upon you because you've scorned the very thing that he's provided to enable you to approach him.

You've scorned the sacrifices. You see, we are saved by grace alone, but we're also saved to serve. We're saved by the sacrifice of Jesus, but you could say that in a sense, we are saved to sacrifice too.

Philippians 2, verse 17 talks about the sacrifice and service coming from our faith. 1 Peter 2, verse 5 talks about living holy for God and doing good as our spiritual sacrifice.

We are saved by grace alone, but a life of sacrifice is evidence of that salvation. A life of self-indulgence by contrast is evidence to the contrary.

It's evidence of contempt for God's name. faith. Remember, the people didn't just bring a lame animal once by mistake.

[33 : 33] It was a consistent pattern over a long time. And so, if you are showing a consistent pattern similar to God's people in Malachi's day, then you're really saying to Jesus, I don't want you, I don't need you, in fact, I don't think much of you.

And if you don't want Jesus, then you're inviting God to turn his face from you. You're saying to him, I don't want your blessing. And if you don't want that, especially if you're a leader, God says, okay then, if that's what you want, hence 2 verse 3, because of you, I will rebuke your descendants, I will smear on your faces the dung from your festival sacrifices, and you'll be carried off with it.

In other words, I will make you ritually unclean and so unfit for service in my temple. Because that's what you want. You don't want to stand before me and worship me.

I'm just giving you what you want. Now, that sounds really harsh, doesn't it? But God uses strong language because he wants to wake his people up.

this is a warning as he puts it in chapter 2 verse 1. And why are warnings given? To prevent us from getting into trouble. We need to pair 2 verse 1 with 1 verse 2.

[35 : 09] I have loved you, the Lord says, and so that's why I warn you. And this brings us to our third and final question for today.

What should we be doing instead of trying to cheat God? Well, 2 verse 2 tells us we are to listen and resolve to honour his name. The priests especially, the leaders especially.

But I don't think it's just the leaders. For don't forget, in the New Testament, God's people are described as a royal priesthood. And so yes, the leaders especially must lead the way.

But every Christian, as those who are called priests under the new covenant must listen to this warning and honour God's name. And to help the priests visualise this, God paints a picture of a godly priesthood.

In verse 5, it's about reverence for God. In verses 6 and 7, it's about faithful teaching and faithful living. And all of this is formalised in what God calls his covenant with Levi in verse 4.

[36 : 18] Levi, of course, is the tribe where the priests come from. They're the tribe in charge of worship. And God is saying, they'll show what worship is really all about.

It's about awe for my name, not contempt for my name. And it's shown in the areas of knowledge, reverence, and lifestyle.

In other words, head, heart, and hands. It's about a whole life given to God. That's what we should be doing.

But why? Because God really wants to bless us. Look at 2 verse 4. And you will know that I have sent you this warning so that my covenant with Levi may continue, says the Lord Almighty.

Why does God want? Why does God speak so strongly? It's because God wants to stay in relationship with his people. He desires the covenant relationship to continue.

[37 : 25] And why does he want this relationship to continue? Well, look at verse 5. And notice what characterises this covenant. It is a covenant of life and peace.

That's what God wanted for his people. He only wanted the best for them. He didn't want them to cheat him because in doing so, they were simply cheating themselves.

But verses 8 to 9 show that the priest failed spectacularly. And that's really the story of the entire Old Testament. The priest gave instruction but the people forgot again and again.

The priests themselves were meant to be role models but they failed again and again. The story of the Old Testament is the story of failed worship. And so that's why the story praise God doesn't stop at the Old Testament.

For in the New Testament the Lord Jesus comes. And one of the things we discover about him is that he's the great high priest. And what's even more amazing is that Malachi chapter 2 verse 6 is actually a perfect description of Jesus.

[38 : 36] True instruction was in his mouth and nothing false was found on his lips. He walked with me in peace and uprightness and turned many from sin.

The Lord Jesus alone is the only priest qualified to offer true worship. And see how he honoured the Father. Not by offering his leftovers but by his very life as the perfect sacrifice.

All so that his people can enjoy life peace and peace. All so that in his name we actually become qualified to offer true worship.

And so as we wrap up here this is the big question God is asking us today. Today are you cheating God? If worship is the offering of our entire lives to him are we offering true worship or corrupt worship?

Are you going through the motions or are you giving him your very best? Now for many of us I'm sure praise God you are seeking to live for Jesus.

[39 : 52] And if that's you then hear today as preventative medicine. Hear it as a warning not to go down that path. But for some of you maybe today you find living for Jesus and serving your brothers and sisters something dull, something boring.

It's something you do simply because you think you have to do it. There is zero love in your heart. You might even be resentful. And if that's you then you must repent.

The Lord is not pleased with you. You need to turn away from your wrong attitudes and turn back to Jesus. Turn back and say sorry to him.

And if you do so you will see a high priest who offered himself as a perfect unblemished sacrifice for you. If you do so you will see a high priest who grants you access to the throne of grace.

If you do so you will see a high priest who is devoted to God in every way. And if you do so you will listen to the one who has true instruction in his mouth who walks uprightly with the Father and the one who can turn you away from your sin.

[41 : 14] See how worthy he is and then ascribe all honour and worth to him by giving him your all.

Let's pray. Let's pray. Father once again I pray that your word will have the effect for which you intended it to have today. If we need to be corrected and rebuke may we accept that correction and rebuke.

If it is to be taught and trained in righteousness may we have been adequately instructed and resolved to continue walking in your ways. Above all Lord help us not to lose our first love for Jesus such that we end up only going through the motions but fan the flame again of that love of Jesus in us to grasp the depth of his grace so that we would desire to serve him wholeheartedly with our entire lives.

All this we pray in his glorious name. Amen.