

Idolatry Equals Adultery, Pt. 2

October 11, 2020
Malachi 2:10-17

We pick up our study of the book of Malachi in chapter 2, vv. 10-17, a passage that uses the language of adultery, of divorcing wives and taking foreign wives. We began our examination of this text last week and we complete it today. As I stated last week and feel even more stressed about it this week, I take this passage not so much an indictment of the men of God divorcing their believing spouses to marry younger foreign wives as instead an indictment against idolatry using the language of adultery, divorce and remarriage. I am fully aware that I am out on a limb on this one. I could be completely wrong, I stand almost alone in my convictions. But I believe them nonetheless. Instead of seeing this passage as coming completely out of the blue, a total change of subject without explanation, I see this as being a continuation of the same topic utilizing language from the realm of marriage.

I am pretty confident that such divorces and marriages to foreign women were a problem in Malachi's day, that's why the terminology fits and works. But I really do see their reference here as an illustration or perhaps a symptom of the real problem. The problem at its core is a state of faithlessness to the covenant of their fathers. The people of God were more interested in themselves, their pleasures, their own desires than what it is that would please God. They placed others or other things before God. They made them idols and here, God is calling them out on it. He is putting it in the terms of adultery, of abandoning the God, the partner of their youth and chasing after the latest, prettiest, strongest new young thing. So, God puts it in the strongest of terms, even bringing out the "D" word, divorce. Now it certainly could be that God hates it when His people divorce their spouses, clearly this is true. But it could also be used here as a threat to idolaters: if you go down this road of idolatry, you are looking at divorce from me. I hate it, but I will divorce you for infidelity to the covenant.

Now, I think it ought to be abundantly clear that God threatening you with divorce is a serious matter. No clear thinking person would knowingly be

involved in activity that would lead to God rightfully divorcing them. When God divorces you, where does this leave you? Without hope. There is nothing else. And in my mind, this fits idolatry. When you leave the God of the covenant for some idol, where does that get you? Can your idol save you? From the examples of idols we listed last week, can your job save you? Your money? Your hobbies? Your career? Can anything or anyone save you apart from the One true and living God? No they can't. And our God will not be cheated upon. He will not accept the taking of a mistress. No, idolatry is serious business.

Hear these words again from the mouth of Malachi the prophet, directed toward the people of God and especially their spiritual leaders who have presided over and approved such behavior by the people. READ Malachi 2:10-17

Main point: Chasing after other gods is the equivalent of committing adultery to our Lord.

Just like marriage, we are in a covenant relationship with our Lord God. It remains in effect until death...or unfaithfulness. Yes, unfaithfulness has the potential to cancel out the covenant. Do you really want to put yourself in that position? Is your bank account, the toy in your garage, your career goals, some honey pot really worth being eternally separated from the only God who can save His people? That is the issue before us this morning.

I. Faithfulness is a big deal to God. vv. 13-15

And we understand why. Our God is faithful in all things. Great is His faithfulness, right? And since He is a covenantal God, one who makes and keeps His promises, He expects the same from those in such a covenantal relationship with Him. He can and does act with grace and mercy toward sinners like us. But faithfulness to the covenant is a big deal to Him. Being faithless to the covenant has dire consequences.

13 And this second thing you do. You cover the LORD's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning because he no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand.

The first thing that the people have done is seen in v.II. They have profaned the sanctuary of God and taken up with another. They have spit upon their vow, their commitment and united with another, whether literal wife, or another god, idolatry.

So, here, the second thing they have done is complain that God has not responded positively to their offerings. They thought they were doing what they were supposed to do, bringing in their offerings, entering the holy place in worship. But to them, God has not been faithful to them, perhaps not blessing them with crops, or bringing strife from their enemies. They were expecting a reciprocal relationship with God where they go through the motions and God blesses them.

But that is not what has been happening. They have been doing their part and ...nothing from God. What's with that? Why is God not doing His part? So, they accompany their offerings with tears, with weeping, with groaning...and He still doesn't respond positively! What's with that! Add emotion to your worship and still nothing. God, why are you being so mean to us?

14 But you say, "Why does he not?" Because the LORD was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant.

Here we see the reason: they were faithless to their covenant, their vows, and the Lord knows it. They have been pretending that all was well, but all was not well. Again, this could literally have been true that they were guilty of committing adultery against their covenant wives. But it also could easily be true in a spiritual sense, being faithless to the covenant with God as well. Or it could be both. Clearly one is the model for the other. The same language is used of both. The point is that God is NOT like a vending machine, where you put your money in, pull the lever and out comes the things you want. That is NOT how His covenants work.

God enters into a covenantal relationship with His people: a lifetime relationship where He keeps His commitment and His people keep theirs. He

protects, provides, guides, saves, they worship Him and Him alone as their God. It is much like a covenantal marriage. Faithfulness, faithlessness, unfaithfulness matter. They are at the core of the relationship. If you are unfaithful or faithless, you ought not expect a happy home! You can add emotion to your pleading, but it is not going to help. God expects fidelity to His covenants, whether to your spouse or to Him! Faithfulness matters to our covenant keeping God! We see why in the next verse.

15 Did he not make them one, with a portion of the Spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

Covenants matter because of the concept of two becoming one. It is true in marriage as seen in Genesis 2:24, but it is also true in our covenant relationship with Him as well. He puts His name on us. He calls us His own. He treats us as His valued, His treasured, His beloved. He expects from us honor, respect, awe. He becomes one with us, and He expects us to be faithful to Him. Can you see how the two covenants in this picture are intertwined? One is the picture of the other. It makes sense that both would be important to Him and faithlessness in one would point to faithlessness in the other. It makes sense that He would use the language of one to describe the condition of the other.

Once more, it make better sense to me in these verses that He is not responding to their offerings, even with tears and emotion because of their faithlessness rather than solely because they have taken foreign wives. The problem in one area was merely a symptom of a bigger, deeper problem in another area. They were just not that concerned about faithfulness, and He was!

His identity was wrapped up in them, the future of His family was wrapped up in them. He wants a people for Himself that will go on into perpetuity. It is a covenant, not a contract. He cares deeply about godly offspring. He wants there to be a next generation. He cares deeply about His name. He has sent His Spirit to dwell in the midst of them. He is totally invested in this relationship. Faithfulness matters!

Can you see how this has implications on both levels, many levels, both human relational and our relationship with God? It is both individual and collective. It has implications for each of us, for us as families, for us as churches, for us as nations. God values and expects faithfulness because He is always faithful. That is the big picture point I see here. But this also leads us to the problematic point in v.16.

II. God is faithful and is wearied by those who are not. vv. 16-17

Because God is faithful, He is not patient with those who are not. Here, it explicitly states that it wearies Him when we are not. It might even give a veiled threat of divorce. At least that's how I take it.

16 “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her, says the LORD, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the LORD of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless.”

As I suggested last week, the translation of this verse is very troublesome. In fact, commentators I consulted this week call it the hardest verse in all the Old Testament to translate. I am not enough of a Hebrew scholar to state with any authority how it should be translated. I know that the words are short and disjointed, leaving translators to add words so we can understand it. And I suspect that if we all spoke biblical Hebrew and were actually hearing Malachi say these words, they would make sense to us. But I do wonder if part of the problem is that those translating might be having difficulty because they have the wrong understanding in mind. Might they be focused on marriage and not on idolatry and how it impacts our covenant relationship with God.

The NIV has it as “I hate divorce,” says the LORD God of Israel, “and I hate a man’s covering himself with violence as well as with his garment,” says the LORD Almighty.” The ESV lacks the strong, straightforward condemnation of divorce, instead using divorce to describe the man’s behavior. “For the man who does not love his wife but divorces her...covers his garment with violence.” Those are two very different understandings. Which one is right? I don’t know.

What I do see as clear is that God has strong condemnation for those who are not faithful to their covenant vows. He warns against it and describes it in vivid, stark terms. That much is clear. It is clear here and elsewhere that God expects fidelity to covenants and hates it when we break them for little or no reason. That too is clear. But it might just be here that since He is going back and forth between the covenant of marriage and the covenant that He has with His people that he is at least hinting a threat of divorce with a faithless spouse, with those who say they serve Him and yet worship idols instead of Him. It could be saying, "I hate divorce, but..." When we act faithlessly toward Him, He is justified in bringing consequences even severe consequences upon us. And in this context, not answering prayers with blessing, even prayers given with tears and emotion, is not the harshest consequences that He could bring down. He might just justifiably divorce His people for their unfaithfulness. I'm not saying authoritatively that this is what v.16 teaches, but I do believe the concept is certainly there. God is not tolerant of those who chase after others, whether people or gods. We best heed His warning.

17 You have wearied the LORD with your words. But you say, "How have we wearied him?" By saying, "Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the LORD, and he delights in them." Or by asking, "Where is the God of justice?"

Again, I see this not as a switching back to the previous topic as much as restating what He has been saying all along. People will always be tempted by new and shiny things in every area of life. The problem comes when those in authority over them condone rather than condemn such a thing. When the clergy call sin, "good," and good, "sin," then it will surely follow that the people will end up doing evil and not doing good. When the clergy say it doesn't matter to God when we break our vows, it wearies Him! And I see this as a central fault of the church and its spokespeople today. There are all kinds of examples of leaders calling evil "good." We live in an era, a society which bends over backward to avoid calling sin, "sin!" That would be offensive. That would demonstrate a lack of tolerance. And one of the most powerful gods of our day is the god of tolerance. By this I don't mean extending grace and mercy to sinners. I do mean refusing to call sin, "sin." Selfishness is sin, any sexual

relationship outside of marriage is sin, greed is sin, gossip is sin, covetousness is sin, slander is sin, hatred is sin, idolatry is sin. The list goes on and on. Condoning sin does no one any good. It takes away from God's grace and mercy.

It is only when we have the full weight of the condemnation of our sin upon us that the gift of God's grace and mercy can be fully experienced. We do no one any favors by refusing to call sin, "sin." So, when we do so, we weary God. He loses His patience with us. He takes action lest we get the idea that we are actually helping people. When we complain about God and His system, His standards thinking we are right and He is wrong, we've lost our voice for Him. When we claim He must be unjust and we are in the right, we prove that we have it all backwards. He is not the sinner, we are. He is the faithful one, we too often are not. When that is the case, expect to be called out by Him, especially if you are in a position of spiritual authority over others. That is a key point of the book of Malachi. Or, to draw from this last verse, we ought not want to "weary" God over who's holding up their end of the covenant we have with Him. You don't want to be on the losing end of that argument. Right?

So, if we believe this passage is the Word of God, then what should be different about our lives?

- 1) We will take seriously our covenant relationships.
- 2) We will protect our eyes from all "new, shiny" things.
- 3) We will not listen to those who downplay sin and its consequences.
- 4) We will remove all idols from our lives.
- 5) We will cherish the covenant relationship we have with God through Jesus.
- 6) We will be faithful to the God who is always faithful to us.