

The Question of Love

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[0 : 00] Well, this week I read three different articles from three different columnists on the Church of England. Actually, three of my favourite columnists, Matthew Parris writing in The Spectator, Rod Liddle writing in The Sunday Times, and Brendan O'Neill writing in Spiked.

And none of these guys would profess to be Christians, but they regularly criticise the Church of England, and in particular, Archbishop Justin Welby, or former Archbishop Justin Welby. And basically, they criticise the Church of England for not being Christian enough, or they criticise Christian leaders for not being Christian enough.

And they expect, and rightly so, that Christian leaders will speak about God, and that God in some way will have an influence on what they say when it comes to social issues, or political issues, or cultural issues, or whatever.

And each of these three articles, in their own way, were saying, it is really surprising. In fact, it is hard to believe that those who seek to represent the Church, or speak for the Church, indeed, should represent God, actually have little to say about God, or about the Bible, or what the Bible actually teaches.

And it's a sad day, I think, when unbelievers basically have to tell leaders of the Church what their job is, or should be. And the sad fact is, that you can have all the outward show of religion, whether the Church, or a title, you can be religious, and yet you can have none of the inner reality of that religion, or real, true, saving faith.

[1 : 48] And that's why the book of Malachi is bang up to date, because Malachi's message strikes at the heart of false religion. Whether the failure of God's people back then, Israel, or the failure of God's people today, the Church.

Because there's a false religion that questions God, that doubts God, that even contradicts what God says, and challenges what God says.

And that's what's striking about the style of Malachi, because it's basically one long debate between God and his people Israel. And it's got this tone of a courtroom, it's a courtroom scene.

And there are six disputes in Malachi, and in these six disputes, the people are basically challenging God, contradicting God, and questioning God. That's why we've called our series in Malachi, questioning God.

Because the book takes this form of these arguments, these debates, these disputes between God and his people. Where the people basically don't listen to God.

[2 : 56] They don't believe what God says. And even they don't care what God is saying to them. And I think it basically highlights the human heart in every age and in every stage of life.

The human heart is prone to question God. It is prone to challenge God. It is prone to contradict what God says. And we're prone to want to do our thing instead of God's thing.

And that's why Malachi is such a helpful book. Whether you would call yourself a Christian believer or not. Whether you believe in God or don't. Because the book is for those who are part of the church, but it's also for those who may have questions about God.

Like, is God real? And if he is, if he's there, then what is God like? Because the great declaration in the book of Malachi is right there at the start.

Which is, I have loved you, says the Lord. That's the executive summary of the book, if you like.

And so while there are some really harsh words that God must say to his people, at the very core and heart of the book is the covenant God's love for Israel.

[4 : 13] God loves people. God wants to be in a relationship with people. People like the Israelites, people like us.

And so before we consider the love of God, which is our theme for today, just a few comments by way of introduction from the first verse. Malachi chapter 1 verse 1 says, A prophecy, the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi.

Now the word Malachi, if you see the footnote in your Bible, means my messenger. And so it's either a personal name or it's a title. I think it's most likely the name of the prophet himself.

He's called Malachi. And he's the last of the Old Testament prophets, with his prophecy coming around 450 years before Jesus appeared in this world.

And so Malachi is a great name because this book is all about God's message, God's message to Israel about the coming of Jesus Christ. And it's not that Malachi prophesied around the same time as Ezra and Nehemiah because much of the content of Malachi about false religion matches what's in Ezra and Nehemiah.

[5 : 28] And so it's set when God had taken his people out away from exile and they had returned to their homeland. And so they're back in their homeland.

The temple has been rebuilt. And they can worship God without fear of persecution. And yet despite all of this and all that God has done, they've got this lukewarm religion.

They're faithless instead of faithful. They're not trusting what God says. Theirs is a false religion rather than a true religion.

And so it's into this disillusionment and this apathy and this cynicism that the Lord speaks to his people through Malachi. And it's described, you'll see, as a prophecy or an oracle.

And it's got this sense of a big, heavy burden. Meaning this is no light or easy message. It's a weighty message because of the substance of God's words and because of the urgent response required of the people.

[6 : 35] Malachi's message is the word of the Lord. In fact, virtually the whole book is spoken by God. God speaks in the first person.

So out of 55 verses, I've counted them, 47 are the Lord God addressing Israel. God speaking to his people.

And that's why Malachi speaks directly to us as the church today. God is speaking, not primarily to me or to you as an individual, but God is speaking to us as the church.

And so the application goes beyond me and my life to all of us, the people of God, wherever we are and whenever we live. And God is speaking in order to challenge and to change his people.

Because we're never far away from the slippery slope of spiritual decline. We're never far away from practicing false religion instead of true religion that worships and obeys and is faithful to God.

[7 : 41] And so Malachi's writing to people who'd drifted from the heart of what true religion is all about. They'd taken for granted everything that God had done for them.

God had been so good to them. God had chosen them to be his people, but they had drifted away. God loved them. God entered into a covenant relationship with them.

And yet they challenge God. And they question God. And it's out of order. And so into this Malachi speaks. And so let's look at the love that God has for his people in Malachi 1, verse 1 to 5.

Three headings for looking at these five verses together. First, the Lord's love declared. Second, the Lord's love doubted. And third, the Lord's love demonstrated. First of all, the Lord's love declared.

Just at the beginning of verse 2. Remember, this is like a courtroom scene. And so these six disputes in this court case are between God and his people.

[8 : 47] And they all actually follow the same pattern. Each dispute has got a statement from God, followed by a question from the people, followed by a response from God.

So the statement from God raises the issue. So we see that here, verse 1. The statement is, I have loved you. And then there's a question from the people that basically disputes what God has just said.

So here, the people ask, How have you loved us? And then there's a response. And God reiterates the truth and gives supporting evidence to what he's saying.

Because he wants the people to change their ways. And so this first issue is the question about God's love. And so if you've been to church for a while, you wouldn't call yourself a Christian, and you're really wondering, Does God love me?

Is he a God of love? Does he care about me? Is he interested in me? Then what we see today, that God is a God of love. He loves his people.

[9 : 56] So look again at verse 2. I have loved you, says the Lord. That's the first thing God says to his people. People who want to question and challenge him and contradict him.

But he says, I have loved you. The Lord loves Israel. And so despite the strong words that God must speak to them, what does he start with?

He assures them of his love. He loved them in the past, and he continues to love them in the present, and he will love them in the future.

His love stretches back to when God chose them to be his people through Abraham in Genesis. And then God entered into a covenant with these people in the book of Exodus.

And so at the outset, God declares his electing, his covenant love for his people, where the message is all about what God has done for them.

[10 : 56] He has loved them, and he has maintained this covenant love for his people despite their sin and rebellion, despite the fact that they challenge and question him.

These people were his treasured possession, says that in chapter 3, verse 17. And so God, in his grace and his mercy, had devised a way of forgiving their sin so that he could keep covenant with them.

Despite being a holy God who could not stand sin and rebellion, he found a way of enabling them to be his people whilst he could forgive their sin.

Because the Lord's desire was to be in a relationship with the people he loved. And whilst he still speaks through Malachi to condemn their sin, what he does is he reaches out in love, calling them to repent of their sin and to turn back to him.

And so he's appealing for them to be faithful in response to his love for them. And yet in contrast to the covenant love of God, the people of Israel's response is poor and weak.

[12 : 11] So rather than remember, rather than recognize, rather than respond to everything that God had done for them, instead they question God's love.

So as people, let's never do the same. Let's never question whether God actually loves us. He does. So that's the first point.

The second point, the Lord's love doubted. The people doubt God's love for them. So the Lord declared his love by saying, I have loved you. But the people challenge this by questioning God. In verse 2, and they say, How have you loved us? Prove it, they say to God. And it's the courtroom scene again where they want to put God in the dock and question God.

God, you've got to give us the evidence to prove that you love us. And so they've got the audacity to challenge God and to question him and to demand that he prove himself.

[13 : 12] And so they're undermining what God has just said. Undermining God's love in the present, but also undermining God's love for them in the past. So the fact that they've even got to question God's love indicates how far away from God that they strayed.

Their words basically express the state of their hearts. They weren't in good relationship with God. It proves that God's covenant meant very little to them.

Now, I think in human relationships, there's nothing worse, nothing worse to observe than when love is given, perhaps in a marriage, but that love is never reciprocated.

It never comes back in return. Even when the love is wrongly questioned and challenged, it's awful to see. And yet that's how these people treat God, who clearly has loved them and continues to love them.

And so we can become so distant from God that we question whether he loves us at all. But it's the ultimate insult. And so we see here that everything God had done for Israel throughout their history was basically a distant memory for them.

[14 : 36] They'd forgotten what God had done. They'd forgotten God's mighty work on their behalf. They'd even been blind to God's love for them in their current experience because God brought them back from exile.

And yet they still questioned God's love for them. Now maybe life was hard, things weren't going well, but they shouldn't doubt whether God loves them.

And they shouldn't challenge the truth of what God says directly to them. And yet that's something that human beings have always done. If you look back to the very beginning of the Bible in the Garden of Eden, just after creation, creation, the people God had made, challenged and questioned him, even contradicted him.

And it's the story of our humanity, our human experience. And for an example, God speaks through his word. We hear his voice in our Bibles.

We can read it, what he says. And yet people will always question or challenge or contradict the truth of what God says. And so we might hear statements like, nobody believes this stuff anymore.

[15 : 47] Do they? Or surely God doesn't want to restrict us by stopping us acting on our natural human desires. Or why would you want to live your life this way?

It doesn't make sense. It's not sane or rational or normal, but it's all just a refusal to take God at his word, to listen to him and believe what he says.

And the underlying assumption is that we know better than God. He's our creator. We're creatures. But we've got more of a clue about our lives than he does.

And so we think God has somehow got to prove himself to us before we will trust him. And this is even worse when it's those who profess to be God's people who question God.

Like many institutional churches tend to do. Who stop listening to what God says in his word and think they know better themselves about what God says or how life should be.

[16 : 57] But it's dangerous when a people lose touch with the living God and question what God says and contradict what God says because it doesn't make life better.

It only makes life worse. In fact, it makes society worse when we reject what God says. And so whilst it might be tempting to question what God says when life is hard, God knows what is best for us because God loves us.

So rather than doubt God's love, we, as the Israelites needed to, we need to respond to it instead. And Malachi is meant to wake us up to our spiritual slumber. To clear out our ears, to open our hearts to receive God's love.

To know in our heads he loves us and so to respond to that love. So the Lord's love is declared, firstly. The Lord's love is doubted, secondly.

[18 : 01] But the Lord's love is demonstrated. Verse 2 to the end of our passage. So God demonstrates his love in the way he chose Israel to be his people.

So verse 2 we read, Was not Esau Jacob's brother, declares the Lord, yet I have loved Jacob, but Esau I have hated and I have turned his hill country into a wasteland and left his inheritance to the desert jackals.

So God proves his love for Israel by going back to their history and reminding them of the story of Jacob and Esau because the fate of each of these twin brothers demonstrates God's love for his people.

The story of Jacob and Esau, you can read it, begins back in Genesis chapter 25 where God told Isaac's wife Rebecca before Jacob and Esau were born that the older would serve the younger and so Esau was the first twin to be born.

He should have inherited all of God's blessings but God chose Jacob who came out second to receive them instead and that's why God says here yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated and so in the sovereign purpose of God God chose Jacob over Esau.

[19 : 32] It would be Israel who are the descendants of Jacob that God would enter into a covenant relationship with. it wouldn't be Edom the descendants of Esau that he would enter into a relationship with.

But God's choice of Jacob had nothing to do with Jacob. It was before Jacob was even born and so it wasn't because Jacob would be a better or more lovable just generally nice guy that God would choose him over Esau.

No when you read anything about Jacob in Genesis you discover he's a deceiver and he's a cheat. He put on fancy dress like in a hairy animal outfit to pretend to his failing father that he was his hairy brother Esau.

And we're told here God chose to love and bless Jacob and work out his purposes through him and he hated Esau.

So this is language here that indicates rejection where the hatred is basically the absence of a relationship. God would enter into a relationship with Jacob and his descendants Israel but he would not enter into one with Esau and his descendants Edom.

[20 : 58] But the point here is that neither of these twin brothers was deserving of God's favor. Yet God chose Jacob.

And so we can only understand this it can only be explained by God's electing love. God chooses to love some. And there's no fuller explanation as to why the younger Jacob was chosen over the older Esau.

Both were descendants of Abraham. Both had the same father. Both had the same mother. But Jacob was chosen so God's salvation purposes would be channeled through his descendants. And that's how God proves his love to his people Israel. He's saying to him I chose you Israel not Edom because Edom remember were Esau's descendants.

And God's saying to them throughout your history there's always been this hostility between Israel and Edom but I've been with you.

[22 : 07] And so further evidence of God's covenant love for Israel is seeing how God overthrew their enemies. That's what's being said there in verse 4. Edom may say though we have been crushed we will rebuild the ruins.

So Edom may resolve to rebuild but the Lord will demolish. Edom would be called the wicked land and the people would be under. God's wrath the wrath of the Lord forever.

Edom would suffer disaster and would not recover. And so this is how God is saying you question my love well let me give you the evidence that you're my people.

They're not my people. God had set his electing love on Israel and so we never stop loving them. God says there in verse 5 this is so that my greatness will be declared beyond Israel.

Verse 5 you will see it with your own eyes and say great is the Lord even beyond the borders of Israel. But you might be thinking well yeah it's kind of unfair isn't it?

[23 : 17] Doesn't it contradict the claim that God is a loving God where in one breath God loves people and the other he hates? Well by choosing to set his love on some but not on others this is what the Bible calls the doctrine of election or what theologians have understood to be the doctrine of election which comes from the Bible and so I guess well what should we say?

Is God unjust? Well the Apostle Paul brings this up again in Romans chapter 9 and he concludes to the question is God unjust?

Not at all and he actually quotes Malachi in Romans 9 verse 10 to 16 so let me just read those verses to you Romans 9 not only that but Rebecca's children were conceived at the same time by our father Isaac yet before the twins were born or had done anything good or bad in order that God's purpose in election might stand not by works but by him who calls she was told the older will serve the younger just as it is written Jacob I loved but Esau I hated what then shall we say is God unjust not at all for he says to Moses I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion it does not therefore depend on human desire or effort but on God's mercy so Paul says God is not unjust he says it all comes down to God's mercy now of course Paul saw the difficulty of God's electing love and so do we but Paul also saw the greater difficulty of making

God's salvation depend on anything else other than his choice because it can't depend on anything other than God's electing love and that's why we might question the electing love of God but we can't really complain about it it's so amazing because it reaches out to undeserving people undeserving people like Jacob undeserving people like Israel and undeserving people like you and me we're all undeserving so the reason some are elected or chosen depends entirely on the mercy of God and you might say well it is unfair isn't it and you're right it is unfair but not in the way that you expect because some will get exactly what their sins deserve like here Edom get what their sins deserve that's fair but others won't get what their sin deserves instead they will get mercy and grace from

God and that isn't fair because we don't deserve it so if you're a Christian today it isn't fair you've been forgiven if God was fair he would punish you for your sin but instead he gives grace and he gives mercy we don't deserve our salvation and we can never earn our salvation but the wonderful thing is that God chooses to give it to us he says as he says to his covenant people I have loved you and not because of anything that we are or anything that distinguishes us from other people but despite what we are God has chosen to set his love upon us why because he has and it humbles us God says I will have mercy on whom I have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I have compassion that's how

[27 : 23] God's love operates and that's why the gospel of Jesus Christ is so amazing because none of us deserve God's love not Jacob not Israel not you not me instead we all deserve God's condemnation we're more sinful than we ever realized and yet at the same time we're more loved

than we could ever dream and so you or I if we profess to be a Christian if we know we are then we're accepted by God not because of our desires or our efforts or our goodness or our achievements but because of God's mercy and grace towards us in Jesus Christ because Jesus God the Son bore the wrath of God against us and grace and grace and grace and grace and grace and grace and grace and grace and grace or else there's no no other hope for us than in Jesus Christ making us acceptable to God just think of it this way if you are a

Christian I wonder if you've ever asked yourself why why me why am I a Christian and why are those other people that I know not Christians well you could say I've received Christ they haven't but if you push a bit further well why have you received Christ and they haven't and you could say well because I've repented of my sin and they haven't but if you push a bit further well why have you repented of your sin and they haven't or you might say well because I humbled myself and they haven't humbled themselves yet and well why did you humble yourself you see we could keep on going on and on and on probing and pressing why why why why why but eventually we get to the place of having to admit okay it wasn't me at all it was god who did it the only reason i am a christian is not because of anything i've done but it's because of what god has done and unless we realize this you know what we're basically saying we're saying i'm a christian and these other people aren't christians because well i'm a little smarter i'm a bit more open basically i'm a better person than they are and that's why it's me and it's not them but it simply isn't true is it you're only a christian because of god's electing love because we see from jacob and israel that god's electing love has got nothing to do with them being better people but it's got everything to do with god's mercy and grace and so as we wind things up if we fail to grasp that god chooses to love us despite what we are then we'll never really understand the love of god god's love is not conditional on how well we perform because we can never perform well enough and so god's electing love should be a huge comfort to us god loves me because he has chosen to love me which might make some of us wonder well how how do i actually know if i'm chosen well the question is have you responded to god's love by believing in jesus christ jesus said john chapter 6 all those the father gives me will come to me and whoever comes to me i will never drive away later on in john 6 he says for my father's will is that everyone who looks to the son and believes in him shall have eternal life and so you know you are chosen if you believe in jesus christ because paul says in romans everyone which if you translate it from the original means everyone everyone who calls on the name of the lord will be saved so if you have not yet responded to the love of god which has been supremely displayed and demonstrated in jesus christ don't question it and don't doubt it instead receive it by repenting of your sin and believing in jesus christ what's to stop you and if you are one of god's people the application is the same don't question god's love don't doubt god's love the lord has said i have loved you and so his covenant love means he'll

never stop loving you whatever your circumstances or whatever your feelings god chose you to be his and so whatever is going on in your life however good or bad and especially however bad or difficult it's not happening because god doesn't love you you can't prove his love by your comfort but you prove his love by his covenant and so today may you hear the lord's declaration of love i have loved you you can see it in the cross where jesus died and may you never doubt his love it's there for all to see but remember he's demonstrated it as jesus hung on the cross bearing your sin your shame your guilt to make you acceptable to god god has fully demonstrated how much he loves us so never doubt it ever let's pray you