

The Question of Worship

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[0 : 0 0] Well, you may have heard of a boxer called Joe Lewis. Let me tell you a story about him. Three young men jumped on a bus in Detroit in the USA in the 1930s and they tried to pick a fight with a lone man who sat at the back of the bus and he was dressed with a hat and a tracksuit on. And so the men insulted him but the man said nothing. And they continued to insult him and abuse him but again he still said nothing. And then this stranger to the men eventually got off the bus when the bus stopped and as he stood up this man was bigger than these three men thought. He was much bigger.

But as he got off the bus he looked at them, he stretched into his pocket, he took out a business card, he handed the men the business card and then he jumped off the bus. And so as the bus drove away these three men gathered around and they looked at the business card and on it it said Joe Lewis, boxer. So they just tried to pick a fight with a man who'd be the heavyweight boxing champion of the world from 1937 to 1949. For 12 years Joe Lewis could easily have beat those three men up when they insulted him. But fortunately for them I guess he got out of bed the right way right that morning and so he left them alone. And I guess they must have felt pretty stupid for insulting this man and for disrespecting Joe Lewis in this way. They didn't realize basically who it was they were dealing with.

And now when it comes to God the issue is we may not be sure who we are dealing with. And that's maybe the case for you if you don't come to church very often. You're wondering about God and just what he is like. And if he's there then how should we treat him? Well we don't want to disrespect God and we don't want to dishonor God. And from a reading this afternoon in Malachi chapter 1 that is exactly what was happening. That's what the people were doing. They'd failed to really recognize who God is and treat him with the honor and the respect that he deserves. And still today people continue to treat God in a shameful and disrespectful and dishonoring way. And that even happens not just out in the world or in society but it even happens within the church. People who profess to believe in God and even be his people can dishonor God and disrespect God.

Because the audience for the prophecy of Malachi basically is Israel. It is the people of God. And the form of the book is basically one big long court case between God and his people. And there are six disputes where the Lord Almighty himself is the main spokesman. And so what God does in the book of Malachi is he brings charges against his people. God brings a charge against them. The people question God and doubt, challenge, disrespect what he says. And so then God brings the evidence against the people for the way that they are treating him. And that's what we see here this afternoon in this second dispute. And it's about the people's false worship. And it's a dispute that actually comes in two parts. If you look down in the first part which was read for us chapter 1 verse 6 to 14 it is the Lord confronting the priests and the people for their worship. So the whole of Israel. And then in the second part chapter 2 verse 1 to 9 the Lord specifically rebukes the priests, the leaders of the people.

And so we'll come to rebuking the leaders next week. But this week it's for everybody. And so the question for us is well do we give God the honor that he is due? Do I, do you respect God in the way that he deserves to be respected? So this dispute takes the form of a typical court case. And that's how we're going to look at it this afternoon on the screen. Three things. There's the charge, there's the evidence, and there's the verdict. The charge, the evidence, and the verdict. So let's look first of all at the charge. And the charge is a failure to honor God. And it's the Lord who brings this charge against his people. In verse 6, 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. So he charges the priests. He gives this accusation to the priests but it is against the whole people. And God gives this example of human relationships here to remind the people of his

own relationship with them. So of course a son honors his father. Today's a good day to remember that, isn't it? On Father's Day. And of course a slave honors his master. And so God says to the people, I am the Lord, I am your father, and I am your master, and yet you fail to honor me. You fail to give me the respect that I am due. Now God had entered into a covenant relationship with his people. And yet they dishonored him as their father, and they disrespected him as their master. And it was disgraceful. You notice that here that God has given the name the Lord Almighty.

[5 : 57] Or more literally, it is the Lord of hosts. And it was a special name given to God. So the Lord Almighty or the Lord of hosts comes up 24 times in the book of Malachi. And it's four chapters.

And we see it come up seven times in our passage that God is called the Lord of hosts or the Lord Almighty. And it's a title that basically declares a powerful truth about who God is. Where hosts refers to a great number of armies or of angels. It's a way of exclaiming that God is great. God is powerful. You do not want to mess with God. He should be honored. He should be respected because of who he is. Herman Bavinck, the Dutch theologian, called the Lord of hosts the king in the fullness of his glory, who is surrounded by regimented hosts of angels, governs the whole world as the Almighty, and in his temple receives the honor and acclamation of all his creatures. Do you know what we are? We are creatures of the creator of the Lord God Almighty. Our purpose in this world, the reason we are here is to give glory and honor to our creator, to the God who made us. And so like the illustration at the start with Joe

Lewis, we do not want to get God wrong. We don't want to mistake him because we think he is this way in our minds when he is the Lord over all. And so the Lord of hosts essentially expresses the power of the Lord. He not just deserves, but he demands our honor and our respect. And yet what we see here in Malachi is that God loves his people, but they treat him shamefully. Even the leaders, even the priests are complicit in this. And we see that in the second half of verse 6, where the Lord says, it is you priests who show contempt for my name. But you ask, how have we shown contempt for your name?

By offering defiled food on my altar. But you ask, how have we defiled you? And it goes on. So the priests are complicit. And yet they are oblivious to how badly they are treating God. And so they protest their innocence by asking how? They're so out of touch with God, they did not even realize there was an issue or a problem in how they were relating to him. But in their worship, they showed contempt for God by doing what? By offering him defiled animal sacrifices. That is poor sacrifices of animals instead of good sacrifices of animals. Basically, they were giving God their worst instead of offering him their best. And the priests should have known this was unacceptable because it was right there in the scriptures of the Old Testament. So listen to these words from Leviticus chapter 22. God says, do not bring anything with a defect because it will not be accepted on your behalf. When anyone brings from the herd or flock a fellowship offering to the Lord to fulfill a special vow or as a freewill offering, it must be without defect or blemish to be acceptable. Do not offer to the Lord the blind, the injured or the maimed or anything with warts or festering or running sores. Do not place any of these on the altar as a food offering presented to the Lord. So the people failed in their offerings.

The priests were supposed to do the offering, but they accepted these duff offerings and they offered them to God and so they failed. So everybody was guilty of dishonoring and disrespecting God.

[10 : 11] God says, you despise my name because they're ignoring the laws that God gave for how the people should worship him. And so God highlights the priests for particular rebuke. Remember Spider-Man? With great power comes great responsibility. The priests had failed and their responsibility to regulate the worship.

And they were allowing anyone basically to bring anything and to offer it to God as if it was good enough when it was a disgrace. And so all of this exposed the unfaithfulness of the people and who, when charged about it by God, they challenged what God said. They weren't even aware that there was any substance to what God was saying to them. But there's plenty evidence that God would bring to this court case. And so that's the first point. It's the charge. But before we get to the evidence, the challenge I think is clear for us. It is, do we give God the honour he is due in our worship? Do we respect him?

Do we treat him as he deserves to be treated as our creator and as the Lord God Almighty?

Because I worry that we might just have a blind spot like the people in Malachi's day did. They didn't even realise that there was anything wrong with their worship. They thought it was acceptable. They

thought it was okay. They thought God was good with what they were offering him. But he wasn't. And so let's say, first, secondly, listen to the evidence. The charge, failure to honour God. Secondly, the evidence is careless worship. Now, in this second dispute, as with every dispute in Malachi, what God says is then immediately questioned by the people. So God said that they offered defiled food on his altar, and yet they respond, how have we defiled you? And so God answered by giving the evidence of their careless worship.

And if you glance down, it's all there in verse 7 to 14, and it's seen in their actions, but it's also seen in their attitude. So their actions. Look at verse 8. When you offer blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice lame or diseased animals, is that not wrong? Try offering them to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you, says the Lord Almighty? See what they're giving? Blind animals, lame animals, diseased animals. Even though the law clearly specified what kind of animals were acceptable to offer to God in worship. And there are so many commands about this. I could give you all the references, but we'd be here all day. And so the worshipers were basically guilty of offering such poor animals to God. And the priests were again guilty for accepting them. And so it was an insult to God. And so God is saying, well, you never behave like this towards the human governors. So your boss at work or your manager or the person who leads you, you would never offer to them an unacceptable sacrifice and think that they'd be good with it or happy with it. So why would you dare think you can offer something unacceptable to God? And this is drilled home with a specific example at the end of our reading, verse 13 14 and 14. When you bring injured, lame or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands, says the Lord? Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable meal in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. So God calls the worshiper who does this kind of thing cursed and he's a cheat. And so just picture the scene for a moment. Here's the worshiper. He vows to offer one of his best animals to sacrifice to God. Great. But instead of giving to God the animal he vowed to give, he breaks his promise and he gives one of his worst animals instead. So just imagine that it's time for the worship to happen. And so the worshiper's got to get his animal ready to kill it, to sacrifice it, and then to offer it to God. And so he surveys his flock out in his field and he sees all of his sheep.

He loves his sheep. Maybe he's even got names for his sheep. And so as he looks around, he looks and he sees Adonis the sheep standing there in all his glory. Fine specimen of a sheep. Fantastic physique. Well maintained sheepy clothes thing. What's it for? Fleece. Fleece. Well maintained fleece. Looks lovely, beautiful, good breeding ability, worth a lot of money. Would also be good for a feast if he was killed and you ate him. Great lamb with mint sauce and all the rest of it. So that's Adonis the sheep. But then standing next to Adonis in his field there is Sean the sheep. And Sean the sheep does not look anywhere as good a specimen of a sheep as Adonis does. Sean is scrawny, skinny. He can hardly stand. Blind, lame, diseased, a miserable looking animal. He's a worthy candidate for sacrifice. And so what does the worshiper do?

[16:14] That's a no brainer surely, isn't it? Just sacrifice this duff sheep that's useless, good for nothing. Except so the worshiper remembers, well, I did vow that I would give this good sheep to God, but ah, well, God's not going to mind. This sheep is useful to me. A lot of money in this sheep. A lot could be done with the sheep, but this one, nah. Just offer this one to God. That'll do. And so that's what he does. And he thinks surely God doesn't mind. A sheep's a sheep after all. And you see, that's how that's how Israel approached their worship of God. It was lax. It was lazy. It was half-hearted.

It basically cost them nothing. And they thought God was good with it. They weren't exactly all in, were they? And while they may have justified it to themselves, in the case of the worshiper with his sheep from his flock, God wasn't impressed. God calls him a cheat for vowing and then failing to keep his promise. God curses him for his behaviour, which is not what it should be. It was careless worship.

In fact, it was so abhorrent to God that God says, stop. Just stop worshipping me altogether. Look at verse 10.

It says, It says, Oh, that one of you would shut the temple doors so that you would not light useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you, says the Lord Almighty, and I will accept no offering from your hands.

That's how meaningless the worship was. The Lord said, shut the temple doors. Just stop it. Don't come into my house pretending you're worshipping me when you aren't. Don't add more insult to

injury. That's how repulsed God was by their actions. And so for God, closing the temple was preferable to perpetuating this pointless worship. They might as well stop meeting because God refuses to accept their offerings anyway.

[18 : 37] That was a sobering message from the Lord. I guess the equivalent would be God saying to us, just shut the door. Don't bother coming to church on Sunday. What is the point of you showing up, pretending, going through the motions when really your heart is not in it? You don't really want to worship me. You don't really want to give to me. It's all just a mechanical process for you. So just stop it.

Cancel Sunday worship. Shut the church. And you see all of these careless actions by the people in Malachi betray the attitude of their hearts.

Don't they? Israel had become weary and resentful and tired of worshipping God. Verse 12, but you promise 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.

Worshiping God was no longer a delight. It was just a burden. And in every way, whether their actions or their attitude or their speech, they resented worshipping God. God says you sniff at it contemptuously.

Everything about worship had become a hassle for the people. They couldn't be bothered. God continued to love them, but they'd grown cold in their love for him. And yet this can happen to God's people in any age, can't it? Whether as a church or as individuals, worshipping God, making sacrifices can just seem like a massive burden. Because we put God in the back seat of our lives rather than in the driving seat, where he's there, he's in the car, as it were. But we don't want him encroaching on our lives too much.

[20 : 42] We certainly don't want him taking control of the steering wheel and directing where we're going and what we're doing. We don't want him to be in charge of our lives. And that was the attitude of the people in Malachi's day. Worship God, yes, but only when it suits me. Worship God, yes, yes, but only if it doesn't involve too much costly sacrifice. A bit maybe, but not too much.

And I guess the people, they still managed to go to the Jerusalem concert hall to hear the fine orchestra play. I'm sure they managed to go and watch Jerusalem United play football on a Saturday.

They maybe even had their season tickets. I'm sure they managed to go to the Jerusalem West End trendy restaurants. They found time and they had plenty money to go out for nice lavish meals with their family. But worship God at the temple? Well, maybe after I've done all these things and if there's time to fit him in, then yeah, well, we'll do it then. Offering God a costly sacrifice? Well, let's just give him as much as we can get away with and that'll do. And so I think the challenge for us is, well, we can be guilty of the same actions or even the same attitude, can't we? Of careless worship. And we can delude ourselves into thinking that what we offer to God is acceptable to him. Similarly, because we judge our offering to God by our standards instead of his perfect standards, whether it be our time or our talents or our treasures. So think of our time, for example, time for God, time for worship, time for prayer, time for community. It can all be squeezed out because we've just got so many other things that take a higher priority in our lives. Hobbies, entertainment, people, sport, stuff we could even do at another time all become too important and so important that God just gets squeezed out. And it results in a failure to honor God because we make him fit around everything else instead of let him have the priority. So that's our time or our talents. And by talents, we're talking about the gifts that God gives to his people, which he gives us to serve him, to serve his people, to serve the world. And yet, we fail to honor God if we grudge using all that he's given to us, the talents he's blessed us with.

We don't want to use them for him. We use them for ourselves or our treasures. That's all the resources God has blessed us with. Money, of course, cars, homes, etc., etc. Malachi is reminding us that we must offer to God our best, meaning it will be costly. And if we're not feeling the cost in any way at all, then we should ask ourselves, am I really sacrificing to God? Am I really, truly worshipping him? Because Malachi reminds us that God is not impressed by us giving him just what we can spare, the leftovers as it were. A couple of weeks ago, I had a chat with another leader in another church. And he told me about a man who offered to give his microwave to the church. And so he had an old microwave. He didn't need it anymore. And he said to my friend, he said, I've got a brand new kitchen. All the appliances are integrated, they fit in, and it's lovely. But I've got this microwave. It's a bit old. Works. Don't really need it. So would the church like it? Could I give it to

the church? And my friend very graciously said to him, well, of course, the church could use the microwave, sure. But would it not better honor

God if you bought a new microwave for the church instead of giving him the old one that you don't really want? And it might be a silly example. But I think it illustrates the attitude that we can have when it comes to worshiping God. Malachi is saying we must honor and respect him in what we offer him by way of our worship. And even when we come to worship, it's easy to make vows, isn't it? It's easy to promise to God what we will do. It probably happens in most of the songs that we sing. For example, that song, I surrender all, I surrender all, all to thee, my blessed savior, I surrender all. Yet in reality, we only actually want to surrender some, a bit, maybe even a wee bit. Or we might sing Jesus, Jesus, all for Jesus, all I am and have and ever hope to be, all for Jesus. And yet, the reality is, well, we're prepared to give a bit for Jesus. Yeah, that'll do, but not too much Jesus.

[26 : 11] And so Malachi reminds us that God is far from impressed by these kinds of false vows and promises, because they're half-hearted, they're easy going, they're cheap offerings, they're sacrifice free, they're false promises, and it's all just careless worship. And so we've got to be so careful that we don't become so desensitized to the Lord God Almighty that we think whatever we offer by way of worship has surely got to be acceptable to Him. I mean, I'm at church on Sunday. Surely God accounts for something.

It doesn't matter that I don't give anything or serve in any way, but I'm here. Surely you've got to be pleased with that God. And yet Malachi is saying to us, we can't pull the wool over God's eyes, if you pardon the pun. He sees our actions and He knows our attitudes, and so He is not going to be fooled. Actually, it wasn't a change of animal that Israel needed for their worship. It was a change of heart that they needed. And so what God said through Malachi should be a warning for us, so that we return to God with repentant hearts, recognizing Him as a Father and as a master, someone we are in relationship with. And so if we dishonor Him or disrespect Him, it's poor, it's bad, it's unacceptable. He needs the honor and respect He deserved. He doesn't need it.

He can do quite well without us, but He deserves it from us. And so that's the charge. Secondly, there's the evidence. And thirdly, the verdict. The verdict is that God is King and should be feared. And what we see here in verse 11 and then verse 14 is that the Lord must be treated with the honor and respect He deserves. 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 so some may dishonor and disrespect the Lord, whether in Malachi's day or today in our own, but God says my name will be great among the nations.

And so Malachi's pointing forward to the time when this would be realized. Again in verse 14, for I am a great king says the Lord Almighty, and my name is to be feared among the nations. And so Israel should have known better than anyone else of the Lord's greatness. He is worthy. Is he worthy? He is.

[29 : 06] And so he should receive the very best that we can give him. And yet the people and the priests of Israel try to fob God off with unacceptable offerings. And yet Malachi saying just God will not be mocked, not then, not ever. And so we cannot get away with unacceptable worship. God sets the standards. We don't.

And yet see how he calls himself a father, which means we can approach him with confidence because of his love for us. But he also calls himself a master. So we must approach him with reverential fear because he is a great king. And we are sinful people who fail to worship God as we should. And our sin excludes us from God's presence. And so whatever we offer to God will never ever be good enough. Just like the best of the unblemished animal sacrifices of Israel could never be good enough for God. He didn't want them.

And so what we offer is never going to be good enough. But the good news is that all of these sacrifices and all of this stuff is not really what God is interested in anyway. Sacrificed animals were never enough. And you know why? Because the only way to truly worship God is through the perfect sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Jesus is the true and better sacrifice that all the other sacrifices of the Old Testament were pointing towards. Jesus is the only lamb without blemish or defect who offered himself to God. And he did it to take on all the defilement of my sin and your sin so that we could be made acceptable to God and fit for God's holy presence. And Jesus is also the true and better worshiper. Not you or me and we never will be. But Jesus perfectly obeyed and always

delighted to do his Father's will. Which means we can be forgiven for our failure to worship God as we should and obey God as we should. But we can also be transformed so that our desires are now to honour God. Not to honour ourselves. Not to give glory to ourselves.

But when Jesus comes and changes our lives we want to give glory and honour to him instead.

Paul says this in Romans chapter 12 verse 1, Therefore I urge you brothers and sisters in view of God's mercy to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God. This is your true and proper worship. And so only when we realise God's mercy towards us in Jesus, that Jesus was the perfect sacrifice on the cross for my sin, only when we discover that and realise that and believe that, will we then want to offer ourselves as a living sacrifice, as our true and proper worship to God. Knowing that if Jesus Christ was sacrificed for me, that no sacrifice that I ever make for him could ever be too great. Which means, well, we'll want to join with

God's people every week, every Sunday to worship him together. And from the rising of the sun to its setting, we'll long to worship the Lord God forever, with all nations. That's the fulfilment of what Malachi is pointing to this future vision in verse 11.

[33 : 20] And so perhaps you've never placed your faith in Jesus Christ and his sacrifice for us. If so, then you're treating the death of Jesus Christ with contempt because you believe you don't need it and it means nothing for you. Which means, whatever you offer to God, however good a person you are, however nice, however many times you come to church, it is never going to be good enough. Your offering will never be enough.

So don't dishonour and disrespect God by rejecting Jesus and thinking you can do it your way. Receive Jesus. Receive him as the one perfect sacrifice that we all need to be acceptable to God. And that is good news.

There's good news that we would always fail. We don't honour, we don't respect God as we should, but Jesus has come and taken the punishment we deserve so that God loves us as his children and we can call him our father. Let's pray together.