

**The Minor Prophets**  
**Lesson 11: The Sins of God's People—Part I**  
**(Malachi 1—2:16)**

**Introduction To Malachi:**

- **Key People:** Malachi, the priests
- **Date Written:** About 430 B.C.
- **Time of events:** Approximately 432-425 B.C. (NLT)
- **Purpose:** To confront the people with their sins and to restore their relationship with God.
- **Author:** Malachi
- **To whom written:** The Jews in Jerusalem and God's people everywhere.
- **Setting:** Malachi, Haggai, and Zechariah were post-exilic prophets to Judah (the southern kingdom). Haggai and Zechariah rebuked the people for failure to rebuild the temple. Malachi confronted them with their neglect of the temple and their false and profane worship.
- **The Christ of Malachi:** The book of Malachi is the prelude to four hundred years of prophetic silence, broken finally by the words of the next prophet, John the Baptist: "Behold the Lamb of God which taketh away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Malachi predicts the coming of the messenger who will clear the way before the Lord (3:1; cf. Is. 40:3).
- **The Key Verses:** 2:17—3:1; 4:5, 6.

**Getting Started**

A church member scolded her pastor for preaching a series of sermons on "The Sins of the Saints." "After all," she argued, "the sins of Christians are different than the sins of other people." "Yes," agreed her pastor, "they're worse."

They are worse, for when believers sin, they not only break the law of God, but they break the heart of God. When a believer deliberately sins, it isn't just the disobedience of a servant to a master, or the rebellion of a subject against a king; it's the offense of a child against the loving Father. The sins we cherish and think we can get away with bring grief to the heart of God.

Malachi was called to perform a difficult and dangerous task. It was his responsibility to rebuke the people for the sins they were committing against God and against one another, and to call them to return to the Lord.

Malachi took a wise approach: He anticipated the objections of the people and met them head-on. "This is what God says," declared the prophet, "but you say \_\_\_\_\_," and then he would answer their complaints. The Old Testament prophets were often the only people in the community who had a grip on reality and saw things as they actually were, and that's what made them so unpopular. "Prophets were twice stoned," said Christopher Morley, "first in anger, after their death, with a handsome slab in the graveyard."

- What approach did Malachi take to deliver his message? How did he anticipate the objections he would face?
- Choose one verse or phrase from Malachi that stands out to you. This could be something you're intrigued by, something that makes you uncomfortable, something that puzzles you, something that resonates with you, or just something you want to examine further. Write that here.

### **Going Deeper**

In this chapter, we'll study what Malachi wrote concerning three of their sins, and then we'll consider the remaining three in the next chapter. But don't read Malachi as ancient history. Unfortunately, these sins are with us in the church today.

### **Doubting God's Love (1:1-5)**

Like Nahum (1:1) and Habakkuk (1:1), Malachi called his message a "burden." The prophets were men who personally felt "the burden of the Lord" as God gave them insight into the hearts of the people and the problems of society. It wasn't easy for Malachi to strip the veneer off the piety of the priest and expose their hypocrisy, or to repeat to the people the complaints they were secretly voicing against the Lord, but that's what God called him to do. "The task of a prophet," wrote Eugene Peterson, "is not to smooth things over but to make things right."

The first sin Malachi named was the people's lack of love for God. That was the first sin Jesus mentioned when He wrote to the seven churches of Asia Minor (Rev. 2:4), and perhaps it's listed first because lack of love for God is the source of all other sin. For centuries, the Jews have recited the "Shema" as their daily prayer (see Deut. 6:4-5 NKJV). But the people Malachi preached to doubted that God even loved them, so why should they love Him?

#### **1. God's electing grace (v. 2).**

The prophet presented several evidences of God's love for Israel, the first of which is God's clear statement of His love (Mal.1:2a)

- a. Malachi was probably referring to what the Lord said through Moses in the book of Deuteronomy, particularly 7:6-11. When God gave the law at Sinai, the emphasis was, "Obey My law because I am a holy God." But when Moses reviewed the law for the new generation, the emphasis was, "Obey the Lord because He loves you and you love Him."
- b. Both motives are valid today.

The second evidence of God's love that Malachi presented was God's electing grace (Mal. 1:2b-3).

- c. As the firstborn in the family, Esau should have inherited both the blessing and the birthright, but the Lord gave them to his younger brother Jacob (Gen. 25:21-23).
- d. The descendants of Esau had their land assigned to them, but God gave the Edomites no covenants of blessing as He did to Jacob's descendants.
- e. The statement that God loved Jacob, but hated Esau has troubled some people. Paul quoted it in Romans 9:10-13 to prove God's electing grace for both Israel and all who trust Jesus Christ for salvation. But the verb "hate" must not be defined as a positive expression of the wrath of God.

- i. God's love for Jacob was so great that, in comparison, His actions toward Esau looked like hatred.
- ii. As an illustration, Jacob loved Rachel so much that his relationship to Leah seemed like hatred (Gen. 29:20, 30-31; see also Deut. 21:15-17).
- iii. When Jesus called His disciples to "*hate*" their own family (Luke 14:26), he was using the word *hate* in a similar way. Our love for Christ may occasionally move us to do things that appear like hatred to those whom we love (see Matt. 12:46-50).
- f. Someone once said to a Christian leader a generation ago, "I have a serious problem with Malachi 1:3, where God says, "Esau I have hated." The Christian leader replied, "I have a greater problem with Malachi 1:2, where God says, "Jacob, I have loved."
- g. We certainly can't explain God's grace and love as we trust Christ and walk with Him. The Lord is even willing to be "the God of Jacob."

## 2. God's blessing of Israel (vv. 4-5).

Malachi's third evidence for God's love is God's evident blessing upon the people of Israel (v.4). Like other nations in that area, Edom suffered during the Babylonian invasion of Israel, but the Lord didn't promise to restore their land as He promised the Jews. The proud Edomites boasted that they would quickly have their land in good shape, but God had other plans. He called Edom "The Wicked Land" (v. 4 NIV), but Israel He called "the holy land (Zech. 2:12). Keep in mind that the Edomites were indeed an evil people (see Obad. 8-14) who deserved every judgment God sent their way. To the Jews, the Babylonian invasion was a chastening, but to Edom, it was judgment.

Think about how God showed His love to the Jewish people.

- a. First, he spared the Jews who were in exile in Babylon (see. Jer. 29). Then, He moved Cyrus to issue the decree that enabled the Jews to return to Judah and rebuild the temple.
- b. He provided the leadership of Joshua the high priest, Zerubbabel, Nehemiah, and Ezra, as well as the prophetic ministry of Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi. Had His people obeyed the terms of the covenant, the Lord would have blessed them even more.
- c. Yes, they were a weak remnant, but the Lord was with them and promised to bless them.
- d. Note, that the name God used in Malachi 1:4 is "Lord of hosts" ("Lord Almighty" in the NIV), that is, "the Lord of armies," a name used twenty-four times in Malachi and nearly three hundred times in the Old Testament. This is the "military" name of God, for "hosts" comes from the Hebrew word that means "to wage war." The Lord is the Commander of the hosts and heaven: the stars (Isa. 40:26; Gen. 2:1), the angels (Ps. 103:20-21), the armies of Israel (Ex. 12:41), and all who trust in Him (Ps. 46:7, 11).

Finally, Malachi reminded the Jews of the great privilege God gave them to witness to the Gentiles (Mal. 1:5).

- a. During the reigns of David and Solomon, God manifested His glory through the nation of Israel so that the Gentiles came from distant lands to see what was happening in Israel. To a lesser degree, this also happened during the times of Josiah and Hezekiah.
- b. The destruction of the temple gave the Gentiles opportunity to ridicule Israel and laugh at their religion and their God (Ps. 74, 137; Jer. 18:13-17; Lam. 2:15-16).
- c. When God brought His remnant back to the land, He wanted to bless them and once again manifest His glory through them, but they failed to trust Him and obey His law.

- d. Though they had been chastened by God and ruined by Babylon, and though they had lost the esteem of the Gentile nations around them, the Jews could have made a new beginning and witnessed to the gentiles of the grace and mercy of God.
- e. Instead, they lapsed into the sins that Malachi attacks in his book, and they gave but a weak witness to the other nations. They missed their opportunity to glorify God.

But, we need to remind ourselves that the trials we experience as individuals or congregations are also opportunities to glorify God before the watching world. That's how Paul viewed his imprisonment and possible death in Rome (Phil. 1:12-26), and that's the way we must look at the testing God sends our way. Every difficulty is an opportunity to demonstrate to others what the Lord can do for those who put their trust in Him.

- How did Malachi know the people lacked love for God? What evidence revealed this to be true? Why did the people doubt God's love for them? How did that affect the way they related to God?

### **Dishonoring God's Name (1:6—2:9)**

Now Malachi directs his message especially to the priests (1:6; 2:1, 7-8), who, instead of living exemplary lives, were guilty of breaking the very law they were supposed to obey and teach. The way they were serving the Lord was a disgrace to His name.

Eight times in this section you find the phrase "my name" (1:6, 11, 14; 2:2, 5; see also 3:16 and 4:2), referring, of course, to God's character and reputation.

- a. The priests who were supposed to honor God's name were disgracing it before the people and the Lord.
- b. The priests were supposed to be God's children, yet they weren't honoring their Father; they were called to be God's servants, yet they showed no respect for their Master.
- c. When Malachi confronted them, the priests arrogantly asked, "In what way have we despised Your name?" (1:6 NKJV), so he told them.

#### **1. Offering defiled sacrifices (vv. 1:6-14).**

- a. To begin with, they were offering defiled sacrifices on the altar (vv. 6-14). The word *bread* means "food" and refers to the sacrifices provided in the law of Moses (Lev. 1—7). These animals had to be perfect; nothing imperfect could be brought to the altar of God and accepted (Deut. 15:19-23; Lev. 22:17-33).
- b. After all, these sacrifices pointed to the Lamb of God who would one day die for the sins of the world (John 1:29; Heb. 10:1-14), and if they were imperfect, how could they typify the Perfect Sacrifice, the Son of God?
- c. The priests were permitting the people to bring God less than their best. If they had offered these defective beasts to their governor, he would have rejected them, but the animals were good enough for the Lord. These priests had forgotten what was written in their own laws. What does this say to professing Christians who spend hundreds of dollars annually, perhaps thousands, on gifts for themselves, their families, and their friends, but give God a dollar a week in the offering?

- Review Malachi 1:6-2:9 and note the numerous uses of “my name.” What does this kind of repetition reveal about how the priests were using God’s name? How were the priests permitting the people to bring less than their best to God? Why would they do this?
  - d. Our offering to God are an indication of what’s in our hearts, “for where your treasure is, there will your heart be also” (Matt. 6:21).
  - e. Giving is a grace (2 Cor. 8:1, 6-9), and if we’ve experienced the grace of God, we’ll have no problem giving generously to the Lord who has given so much to us. How can we ask God to be gracious to us and answer prayer (Mal. 1:9) if we’ve not practiced “grace giving” ourselves?
  - f. Malachi told these disobedient priests, that it would be better to close the doors of the temple and stop the sacrifices altogether than to continue practicing such hypocrisy. Better there were no religion at all than a religion that fails to give God the very best.
- What did Malachi tell the disobedient priests? Why is hypocrisy such a grievous sin? What did God expect of the priests? How did they fall short of His expectations?

If our concept of God is so low that we think He’s pleased with cheap, half-hearted worship, then we don’t know the God of the Bible. In fact, a God who encourages us to do less than our best is a God who isn’t worthy of worship.

The day will come when the Gentiles will worship God and magnify His great name (v. 11). Malachi looked ahead to the times when the message of salvation would be taken to all nations. Beyond that, he saw the establishing of the kingdom on earth when Gentiles would “flow unto it.”

- g. The priests even allowed the people to cheat on their vows (Mal. 1:13-14). If a man promised God a sacrifice but brought an animal that was sick or blemished, the priest would accept it, even though the man had a perfect animal back home.
- h. In Mosaic law, vows were purely voluntary, but once they were made, they were binding (Lev. 27; Num. 30; Deut. 23:21-23). If the governor wouldn’t accept cheap offerings (Mal. 1:8), would a great king accept cheap substitutes (v. 14)? God is a great King and He deserves the best we can bring Him. What we promise, we must perform.

Why did the priests deliberately disobey their own law, pollute the altar of the Lord, and encourage the people to worship God in a cheap careless manner? For one thing, the priests themselves weren’t giving God their best, so why make greater demands on the people? “Like people, like priests” (Hos. 4:9, see Jer. 5:30-31), for no ministry rises higher than its leaders.

But there was another reason why blemished sacrifices were acceptable: The priests and their families were fed from the meat off the altar, and the priest wanted to be sure they had food on table.

- i. The economy was bad, taxes were high, and money was scarce, and only the most devoted Israelites would bring a perfect animal to the Lord. So, the priests settled for less than the best and encouraged the people to bring whatever was available.
- j. A sick animal would die anyway, and crippled animals were useless, so the people might as well give them to the Lord!
- k. They forgot that “to obey is better than sacrifice, and to hearken than the fat of rams” (1 Sam. 15:22; Ps. 51:16-17; Mic. 6:6-8; Mark 12:28-34).

## 2. Despising divine privileges (vv. 2:1-9).

The priests dishonored God's name in another way: They despised the very privilege of being priests (Mal. 2:1-5). They were taking for granted the high calling God had given them and treated the temple ministry with contempt. Serving at the altar was a job, not a ministry, and they did it to please themselves, not to please and glorify the Lord. Unfortunately, that same attitude is in the church today.

- a. God warned them that He would "curse their [Israel's] blessings" if they didn't start "doing the will of God from the heart" (Eph. 6:6) and giving Him their best.
  - b. God warned that He could curse the very seed that was planted so that it would never germinate and produce a harvest. Since the law gave the priests and Levites a tithe of the produce, ruined crops would mean empty tables.
  - c. It's possible that the word seed in Malachi 2:3 may refer to their children. It was important that the Jews have children in order to perpetuate the nation, but God could prevent even human seed from being productive. Another way of looking at it is that God would turn their children, who should be a blessing (Ps. 127), into a burden and a curse.
  - d. The refuse from the sacrifices was taken outside the camp and burned (Ex. 29:14), but God would humiliate the priests and "wipe their noses" in the dung of the sacrifices! This would make the priests unclean so that they would have to leave the camp.
  - e. The priests took their privileges for granted and forgot the gracious covenant God had made with them through Aaron (Mal. 2:4; Ex. 29) and Aaron's grandson Phinehas (Num. 25:1-13). It was a great privilege to be a priest, to serve at the altar, to minister in the temple, and to teach the law to the people. But the priest had no fear of God; they treated the sacred things as if they were common things because their hearts weren't right with God (Ezek. 44:23).
- In what ways were the priests' actions all about ritual, not ministry? How can we tell when something is empty religious formality rather than sincere worship? What clues reveal sincerity of worship or ministry?

There was a third sin: They turned away from God's law (Mal. 2:6-9). Verses 6-7 describe the perfect servants of God: truth on their lips, obedience in their walk, fellowship with God, a burden to bring others to the Lord, and a passion to share God's Word with those who need to hear it. But the priests weren't following this pattern; they were following their own ways. "They shall teach Jacob thy judgments, and Israel thy law" (Deut. 33:10). But the priests weren't even obeying the law themselves.

- a. It was bad enough that the priests were disobeying the law, but they were causing others to stumble as well (Mal. 2:8). Like the Pharisees Jesus described, the priests were "toxic" and defiled everything and everybody they touched (Matt. 23:15; 25-28). A false minister is an awful weapon in the hands of Satan.
- b. The author of this textbook, Warren Wiersbe, states that over the years he has participated in many ordination examinations, and he looked for four characteristics in each candidate:
  - i. Personal experience of salvation through faith in Jesus Christ.
  - ii. A sense of calling from the Lord.
  - iii. A love for and knowledge of the Word of God.
  - iv. A high respect for the work of the ministry.

- c. Whether a pastor, missionary, teacher, choir member, or usher, being a servant of God is a serious thing, and it deserves the very best we can give.
- d. God caused these hypocritical priests to be “despised and humiliated before all the people” (Matt. 2:9 NIV).
- e. The priests wanted to be popular, and even twisted the law to gain friends, but the people had no respect for them. Leaders with integrity and character will have their enemies, but they will gain the respect of the people.

### **Profaning God’s Covenant (2:10-16)**

Having dealt with the sins of the priests, Malachi now turns to the nation as a whole and confronts the men who divorced their wives to marry pagan women.

#### **1. Treachery (vv. 10-11,14).**

- a. The men loving pagan women wasn’t a new problem in the Jewish nation. When the Jews left Egypt, there was a “mixed multitude” that left with them (Ex. 12:38), which suggests that some Jews had married Egyptian spouses (Lev. 24:10; Num. 11:4). The Jews sinned greatly when they mixed with the women of Midian at Baal Peor (Num. 25), and God judged them severely. Ezra (Ezra 9:1-4) and Nehemiah (Neh. 13:23-31) had to content with this problem, and it’s not totally absent from the church today (2 Cor. 6:14-18).
- b. In divorcing their Jewish wives and marrying pagan women, the men were committing several sins. To begin with, it was treachery as they broke their vows to God and to their wives. They were profaning God’s covenant and treating it as nothing.
- c. Not only had the Lord given specific requirements for marriage in His law (Ex. 34:11-16; Deut. 7:3-4), but the covenant of marriage was built into creation. Malachi 2:10 refers to God as the Father of all humans, the Creator (Acts 17:28). God made men and women for each other and established marriage for the good of the human family. So, what these men did was contrary to what God had written into nature and in His covenant.

#### **2. Hypocrisy (vv. 12-13).**

- a. After committing these sins, the men then brought offerings to the Lord and wept at the altar (vv. 12-13), seeking His help and blessing.
- b. Perhaps they had the idea that they could sin blatantly with the intention of coming to God for forgiveness. But if they were truly repentant, they would have forsaken their heathen wives and taken their true wives back, which is what Ezra made them do (Ezra 9—10).
- c. These men were guilty of hypocritical worship that had nothing to do with a changed heart. Instead of forgiving them, God was ready to “cut them off.”
- d. In matters of ethics and morals, there are many things in society that are legal but are not biblical. Brides and grooms must remember that God is an unseen witness at every wedding (Mal. 2:14), and He also witness those who live together who aren’t married.
- e. One day there will come a terrible harvest from seeds being planted today by those who despise God’s laws and the principles He has built into nature.

#### **3. Purity (v. 15).**

- a. In the entire book of Malachi, this is recognized as the most difficult verse to translate and interpret. The author of this study guide thinks the best translation is given by Dr. Gleason Archer: “But no one has done so who has a residue of the Spirit. And what does that one

seek for? A godly offspring! Therefore, take heed to your spirit [as a true believer under the covenant] and let none of you deal faithlessly with the wife of his youth." Malachi commended the faithful husbands who obeyed the Spirit of God and the Word of God. Unlike the men who took pagan wives just to satisfy their sexual hunger, these faithful men wanted to father children who would be a godly seed, devoted Jews, and not idol worshippers.

- b. The basic issue was loyalty to the God of Israel and the maintaining of a godly home.
- c. God called Israel to be the channel for bringing the Messiah into the world, and anything that corrupted that stream would work against His great plan of salvation. God commanded the Jews to be a separate people, not because they were better than any other nation, but because He had a very special task for them to perform.

#### 4. Hostility (v.16).

- a. "I hate divorce!" (NIV) is about as clear a statement as God can make. Those who want to please God certainly wouldn't want to do anything that God so abhors but would do everything possible to heal the marriage.
- b. God gave Adam one wife, not many, and he declared that the two were one flesh (Gen. 2:21-25).
- c. Divorce pulls apart that which God put together, and Jesus warned us not to do that (Matt. 19:6). It's like an act of violence in an area where there ought to be tenderness.

Why does Malachi mention a "garment and violence"? In modern Western society, a man puts an engagement ring on a woman's finger to propose marriage, but in ancient Israel, he placed a corner of his garment over her (Ezek. 16:8; Ruth 3:9). "If a man divorces his wife, instead of having a garment that symbolized love, he had a garment that symbolized violence. He wrenched apart that which God said is one; by his infidelity, he made the marriage bed a place of violence.

In spite of a difficult text and differing interpretations, the main lessons of this passage are clear. In marriage, a man and a woman become one flesh, and God is a partner in that union. Through marriage, the Lord is seeking a godly seed that will carry on His work on earth. Marriage is a physical union ("one flesh") and can be broken by physical causes: *death* (Rom. 7:1-3), *sexual sin* (Matt. 19:9), or *desertion* (1 Cor. 7:12-16). God's original intent was one man and one woman be devoted to each other in marriage for one lifetime. Divorce for reasons other than those given in Scripture, even though legal, would grieve the heart of God.

Strong families begin with strong marriages, a man and a woman who love each other and want to live each for the other and both for the Lord. Anything less than that is less than God's will.

- Review Malachi 2:10-16. Why is there such an emphasis on divorce here? What does that suggest about the culture of the time? What message was God giving the people? (See Matt. 19:6). What does Malachi 2:10-16 say to us about how God values the family?