

Malachi 1:6-14 (1984 NIV)
God Deserves Highest Honour

⁶ “A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?” says the LORD Almighty. “It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.

“But you ask, ‘How have we shown contempt for your name?’

⁷ “You place defiled food on my altar.

“But you ask, ‘How have we defiled you?’

“By saying that the LORD’s table is contemptible.

⁸ When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled 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.

⁹ “Now implore God to be gracious to us. With such offerings from your hands, will he accept you?”—says the LORD Almighty.

¹⁰ “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.

¹¹ My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,” says the LORD Almighty.

¹² “But you profane it by saying of the Lord’s table, ‘It is defiled,’ and of its food, ‘It is contemptible.’

¹³ And you say, ‘What a burden!’ and you sniff at it contemptuously,” says the LORD Almighty.

“When you bring injured, crippled or diseased animals and offer them as sacrifices, should I accept them from your hands?” says the LORD.

¹⁴ “Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I am a great king,” says the LORD Almighty, “and my name is to be feared among the nations.

Introduction

In Mal. 1:6-14, God took issue with His people concerning one matter—He charged them for despising (dishonouring) His name with their offerings. Israel was to bring their offerings to God not because He needed them to survive, but as an expression of their need of God. To refuse to offer their gifts to God was to say that God was not necessary to their survival, when in fact without him they could not survive.

When the people came to worship, what they brought had to pass two important tests. What they brought had to be the first and the best. God gets His share first because He is the most important. It had also to be the best—the best firstborn or first fruit offering. To bring God an inferior gift would say that one did not think much of God.

The story is told about the baptism of King Aengus of Ireland by a great saint, St. Patrick, in the middle of the fifth century. Sometime during the rite, St. Patrick leaned on his sharp-pointed staff and accidentally stabbed the king's foot. After the baptism was over, St. Patrick looked down at all the blood, realized what he had done, and begged the king's forgiveness.

"Why did you suffer this pain in silence," the saint asked his king.

The king replied, "I thought it was part of the ritual."

(<https://bible.org/illustration/king%E2%80%99s-baptism>)

Rituals are not always bad. But the danger is that when we view something as a ritual or when we ritualize something, we can keep on doing it as a matter of blind habit without questioning even if it is not a good thing.

This was what happened to the Jews after their return from captivity. Though the Jewish nation was purged from the worship of other gods, they faced a new problem. It had to do with their worship of Yahweh being corrupted by indifference and selfishness. They focused more on themselves rather than God. Hence, their practice of faith in God became ritualistic rather than relational.

And so Malachi had to address this new problem in the nation. In 1:6-14, he directed at the priests but certainly he was also speaking to the people. He told them that God was not pleased with their giving and worship as these indicated their lack of honour for God.

God deserves our highest honour. It is not wrong for God to expect our highest honour because of who He is. Two ways we can honour God's name.

I. We honour God's name when we give Him the cream and not the crumbs (vv. 6-9).

Malachi begins his message with a couple of affirmations that the people would agree with wholeheartedly. He declares, "A son honors a father, and a servant his master." They would respond, "Yes, this is what the Law said, and this is how things ought to be." The word "honors" indicates that the son would give his father and the servant his master the proper weight of authority.

But Malachi follows this with two blunt questions from God—"If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?"

The accusation is clear—the people were not honouring or respecting the Lord, and so they did not really consider Him their Father or their Master. They do not honour the Lord and they do not respect (fear) Him. God was charging them—"You are only good at mouthing your honour and respect for me, but you are not good at showing it!"

And who are these who so dishonour and disrespect the Lord? Malachi identifies them in v. 6—"It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name." Surprise! Surprise! The culprits were the priests. This means this sermon is only for the priests (the fulltime servants in God's temple), and by implication, for the fulltime pastoral and ministry staff today. So the rest of you can leave now if you so wish!

But wait a minute! If we believe in the priesthood of all believers as a result of the finished work of Jesus Christ, each of us is then a priest in God's presence. And that means this message from God through Malachi is for all of us here today.

For the Jews then, their relationship with God slipped into just an outward commitment to be physically present at the temple on the required occasions. Instead of looking forward to be in the temple to truly worship God, they were looking forward more to getting out of the temple and head for home!

As Malachi would warn us—this is not giving God the highest honour; this is despising (bringing contempt to) His highest name.

The priests thought they were doing everything right—saying the prayers and the blessings, making all the right sacrifices—so they responded (or at least that's how God through Malachi would anticipate), "How have we shown contempt for your name?"

They might have made mistake here or there, but surely they hadn't despise the name of the Lord. But the Lord charged them otherwise.

The charge was that they had lost focus on God and gotten lost in self and the rituals of worship. The Lord said through the prophet that they were offering

defiled food on the altar of God. What they were offering to God did not measure up to the standards for God deserves the highest honour.

This was a serious charge because of the requirements in the Law. They were supposed to bring sacrifices that were “perfect”—i.e. healthy animals without blemish. There was one important reason for this.

The sacrifice was a gift that was to be offered to God. The kind of gift that someone gives indicates what they think of the person they are giving it to. E.g. if a husband gave his wife a new mop as a gift on their wedding anniversary, the gift would certainly not be well received by her because it would speak volumes of what he thought of his wife. She’s appreciated as no better than a house cleaner all these years! Or if someone gave another person a gift that was old, used, worn out, and of no use any more, it would be an insult. He would just be dumping off some junk on the other person. So to bring a gift to God that was defiled was a real insult.

Verse 8 explains how the name of the Lord was despised or brought into contempt with the defiled things the people brought to His altar—“When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?”

The people knew they had to bring animal sacrifices to the sanctuary for their worship—an animal for a sin offering, another animal for the burnt offering, a third animal for the peace offering. That could get expensive, of course. And so they brought the animals that were diseased, crippled, blind, and worthless—animals they could not sell or use and would not want to eat. BUT they could offer them to God. After all, these would only be burnt up. So this was a very practical thing to do (so they thought)—fulfil the ritual and get rid of the unwanted livestock at the same time. Clear the fridge and buy new stock for next week!

But Malachi challenged them—“Try offering them to your governor! Would he be pleased with you? Would he accept you?” Imagine having a VIP in your house for dinner and serving him your leftovers from last night. Would you do that? Of course not! That’s the point Malachi was trying to stress to the people.

But God is even more important than the governor. So why do people think they can get away with giving Him inferior gifts? It is only right that we give God our best and not our leftovers.

The people in Malachi’s time still went through the motions, came to the temple, brought sacrifices, said the prayers, did the songs, etc. But what had been evident were their joyless attendance, sickly sacrifices, and irreverent attitude. The problem wasn’t a lack of outward worship. Rather, it was a lack of heart worship. They did not honour God as the God of over all, but dishonoured Him as the God of leftovers.

But the people in Malachi's day were not the only ones guilty of this. We too can be just as guilty if we do not check and guard ourselves. Instead of the scriptural practice of letting God get the first and the best, we give Him way after our first and way below our best. And we expect God to be pleased with us.

Malachi tells us that if we are guilty of not giving God the cream but the crumbs, the way out is to "implore God to be gracious to us" (v. 9). We have a choice. If we have violated the holy things, we can pray to the Lord to forgive us in His grace. Don't give ourselves any more excuses for God has no pleasure in or respect for the one who chooses to offer God something that is sub-standard even though he has something better in his hands.

We all have our own prized possessions. For me, I find it easier to give away my money than to give away my books (not that I have much money to give away). Over the years, I have bought so many books that I now have to intentionally stop buying them. It is not because I have stopped loving books, but I have no more space at home to store them.

My dear wife recently bought me a Kindle where I can buy e-books and store them in the e-library. That's supposed to save money as e-books are less expensive and save space as I don't need more book shelves.

On my recent trip to Myanmar, I visited this Bible school that needed at least 10,000 books as they worked towards accreditation. I decided that I would give to them some from my personal library. So I scoured through the books I had. And you know what? It was so difficult for me to decide which to give away. Each one had a special appeal to me.

I managed to fill up a luggage bag full of books to be given away (all weighing about 20 kg). Then I decided to go through again this selection of books to be given away. And you know what I discovered? I discovered that most of the books that I eventually decided to give away belonged to the "inferior" category in my library collection—old ones, torn ones, authored by lesser known people, etc.

At first I tried to justify that "beggars are no choosers". But the Lord convicted me and I realized that I was like the people in Malachi's time—giving to God's work not my first and best, but my leftovers. And I had to seek God to forgive me and change my attitude.

For young people, what does it mean to give God the cream and not the crumbs? Let me suggest this—seek to be used by God in your early and best years when you are strong in mind, body, and spirit. When I say "used by God", I don't mean do fulltime Christian ministry though it can mean that to those so led by God. What I mean is to make a difference for God with what He has blessed you in where He has placed you. Don't delay until you are in your 60s or 70s and then tell God that you want to make a difference for Him.

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Of course, God does lead and use people mightily in their 60s or 70s. But bear in mind that when you obey in your 60s or 70s, you are likely to carry with you not only a passion for God's work, but also a pill box of medication for your high blood pressure, high cholesterol, diabetes, etc. (like me). You know what I mean?

When God blesses us, He allows us to enjoy a higher standard of living for ourselves. More than that, He also expects us to exercise a higher standard of giving for His Kingdom work. We honour God when we offer Him the cream and not the crumbs.

God deserves our highest honour. It is not wrong for God to expect our highest honour because of who He is. There's a second way we can honour God's name.

II. We honour God's name when we worship Him in reverential fear (vv. 10-14).

Malachi declared in v. 10 that the people's attitude was so displeasing to God that he wanted someone to "shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar" for He would "accept no offering from your hands".

God takes no pleasure in worthless worship. In fact, He rejects it! If people do not do it with love and devotion, but only out of compulsion to follow a ritual, their giving and worship will be worthless, and they will be rejected.

However, they not worshiping God with honour would be THEIR loss. God would still be honoured and honoured by the other nations in good time.

In v. 11 we have one of the early predictions of Gentile faith—"My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations," says the LORD Almighty.

The Gentiles will worship Him with honour. In time this is what happened—God turned to the Gentiles in Jesus Christ and made them His people who would worship Him in faith and obedience.

We too are Gentile believers of God in Jesus Christ today. We are not to follow the example of the Jews in Malachi's time—i.e. they wanted God's best but not willing to give Him their first and best. Let's remember not to repeat their folly. Let's remember that if we have the ability to give to God good sacrifices and we instead give Him poor ones, we will not find joy in our relationship with God.

That was the problem with the Jews in Malachi's time. And even worse, Malachi said they were not even trying to hide their true feelings. In v. 13, God said this of them through Malachi—"And you say, 'What a burden!' and you sniff at it contemptuously."

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Another way to interpret it—“And you say it by snorting your nose in the air, “How boring! How wearisome! What drudgery!” The snorting must be some gesture of disgust. To the people, to worship God in His temple with sacrifices, prayers, praises, and thanksgiving was a real drudgery. There was no joy in worship, no delight in serving God.

This attitude of drudgery prevails today when our worship and service become nothing more than a ritual and routine. People go through it all, but as something to endure with no genuine praise and thanksgiving.

Malachi’s message concludes with a strong word from the Lord in v. 14—“Cursed is the cheat who has an acceptable male in his flock and vows to give it, but then sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord.”

God is no man’s fool. He sees the heart of every man and no one can cheat or deceive Him. If His people keep the best for themselves, and offer Him their junk, He may one day take away the best they have.

We show the kind of joy we have in our relationship with God by the kind of sacrifices we make to Him. This is why the Bible tells us that God loves a cheerful giver because there is joy in his giving. Don’t hold back the best for ourselves if we have been blessed by God. God calls such person a “cheat” because he can give better sacrifices but chooses not to.

The Lord declares in the last part of v. 14—“For I am a great king ... and my name is to be feared among the nations.” To refuse to give one’s best to God but still expect Him to continue to bless is showing no fear of God in one’s life.

Fearing God involves honouring His holiness, showing a healthy concern for not pleasing God. Indeed, a biblical fear of God includes understanding how much God hates sin and fearing His judgment on sin. As children, the fear of discipline from our parents no doubt prevents some bad actions. The same is true in our relationship with God. We should fear His discipline, and therefore seek to live our lives in such a way that pleases Him.

To be sure, believers are not to be scared of God. We have His promise that nothing can separate us from His love. We have His promise that He will never leave us or forsake us. Fearing God means having such a reverence for Him that it has a great impact on the way we live our lives. The fear of God is respecting Him, obeying Him, submitting to His discipline, and worshipping Him in awe.

In 6 Oct 1939, Adolf Hitler said this in his speech, “As Fuehrer of the German people and Chancellor of the Reich, I can thank God at this moment that he has so wonderfully blessed us in our hard struggle for what is our right, and beg him that we and all other nations may find the right way, so that not only the German people but all Europe may

once more be granted the blessing of peace.” We hear here a man ambitious to do the will of God not only for his country, but also for all Europe.

(https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Religious_views_of_Adolf_Hitler)

Hitler made another statement more than a year later in March 1941. This time, it was in open defiance to God. Speaking to the German people, he said, “See my people? We do not need anything from God! We do not ask anything from him except that he may let us alone. We want to fight our own war, with our own guns, without God. We want to gain our victory without the help of God.”

At the height of his success, Hitler thought his power alone was sufficient to overcome any odds.

But in April 1945, Berlin was surrounded by Soviet and American troops who were all ready to divide up the city. The city was falling. All hope for a greater Germany was literally laid waste before the people’s eyes. They had been promised a new, more powerful Germany and a united Europe under Hitler’s rule. Now all they could see was destruction, death, and anguish.

So demoralized was Hitler, that on 30 April 1945, he committed suicide in his own bunker. He had cherished great plans of kingly authority and unlimited power. He had seen early success and a unity of the German people. Everything seemed to be going his way. Then all of a sudden things began to change. What had happened? Why did Hitler lose the war?

Hitler had resources, manpower, loyalty, money, and power, to perform any task, yet he failed to unite Europe, with Germany as its leading state. He had all these, BUT the tragic thing is that because he had all these and could stir up fear of him in others, he himself had lost the fear of God in his life.

(<https://www.stepstolife.org/why-hitler-lost>)

Most of us spend only a couple of hours in church and the rest of our time out there in the world, a world that runs on a system that is often not congruent to that of God. It is a world that often tempts us to walk away from God rather than walk close to Him; to fight Him rather than to fear Him. It is no wonder that the idea of fearing God can be viewed as old-fashioned, unhealthy and unscriptural even by God’s people today. I believe the many “bad things” we hear and see happening in our churches today are a sad commentary of this viewpoint—to expect God to always favour us and grant us His blessings, rather than to expect ourselves to always fear God and give Him our best.

But the Bible teaches us that “to fear the LORD is to hate evil” (Prov. 8:13). So we need to seek God not merely to bless us, but to bless us with a reverential fear of Him. For this is what will surely honour His name in our midst and in our world.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by suggesting that a God-honouring lifestyle is characterized by:

- Giving. One key reason why God’s people in Malachi’s time degenerated in their worship of God was because they were concerned about living for themselves and not for God or others. Hence, one way to overcome such an attitude is to cultivate joy in giving—make giving as a lifestyle. Give and help make a difference in somebody’s life. Help ease someone’s burden. Help cheer someone up. Help bring new hope to someone. Be a giver with an open hand and not just a taker with a clenched fist. Look for opportunities to share God’s love, God’s gifts, and God’s goodness with others.
- Excellence. By excellence, I mean going the extra mile to do what’s right even when no one is watching us. Work for the glory of God each day. We represent and reflect God in how we live, dress, care for our home, run our business, and do our work. If we do just enough to get by, it’s like giving God the crumbs and not the cream; like treating Him as the tail and not the head. Malachi says that God will not bless such an attitude.

God deserves our highest honour. It is not wrong for God to expect our highest honour because of who He is. He is no lightweight deity. He is the One, Only, and Almighty God Himself.

As children of God, you and I bear His name. The only right response today is to honour His name by giving our best to Him and fearing to stain His holy name. Let’s seek God to so help us give Him the highest honour. Amen!

Reflection Questions

1. What are some things that hinder God’s people from giving their best to Him? How would you overcome these hindrances in your life?
2. What are some ways that God’s people show lack of reverential fear of Him in their lives? How would you address or prevent this lack in your own life?