

MALACHI- I LOVE YOU, DO YOU LOVE ME?

Malachi 1:1-5

A book worth getting is this one by Gary Chapman: “The Five Love Languages”. He suggests people give and receive love in five different ways: saying it in words, spending time with each other, giving gifts, doing things for each other and touching/hugging. Chapman says that if a couple don’t use the same love language it’s possible to love someone in a way that does not communicate our love to them. An older couple was in the kitchen of their home, married for 30 years. The wife was crying: ‘why don’t you ever tell me you love me?’ The husband replied ‘When we were married I told you I loved you, and if I ever change my mind I’ll let you know.’ Sounds like this couple spoke different love languages. How do you know someone loves you? How do you show love to another? This is important not only as a husband and wife, or to your children, it’s also a very important question in our relationship with God: how do we know God loves us, how do we show our love for him? Last December our church leadership team (elders/deacons) met to plan for this year. The discussion revolved around Ephesians 4 & ‘*living worthy of our calling*’. One person expressed concern about those seldom attending church services, lack of involvement and giving; and they suggested the elders should visit and confront them. Another person said, that was an issue, but care was needed that the elders didn’t just push a legalism, an outward Christian culture without a living (love) relationship with God. That can easily happen where a church is part of the established culture. Christian lifestyle is not just a cultural thing; it is an expression of a living relationship with God. It comes about as a response to realizing how much God loves us and in awe and humility we love God back, with all our heart, in all of life. The conclusion of the discussion was that before we challenge one another in areas we lack in, we need to ask ‘how close are we/you to God? Are you deeply devoted to God or are you losing touch with the living God?’

This is the situation that the prophet Malachi speaks to. He prophesied around 450 BC in Israel, one of the last prophets to speak for God. After that there was a 400 year period when God was silent, he gave no revelation till Jesus came. Malachi challenged God’s people around the time of Nehemiah (just before his arrival to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem or during his absence later on). The Israelites had returned from 70 years of exile in Babylon. Jerusalem was being rebuilt, the Temple restored. But the people had not learned their lesson from the exile. Their religion was again just part of their culture. They went through the routines of their faith, but they had grown skeptical of God’s love; careless about worship, stingy in their offerings, faithless in their marriages, indifferent, apathetic. It was about 80 years after Haggai & Zechariah had spurred the people on to rebuild the temple. Disillusionment had set in. Times were hard and the promised prosperity had not been realized. The people felt let down by God and it showed in their increasingly casual attitude to worship and the standards God had set.

It’s to these people that Malachi is called to speak; note 1:1 “*An oracle: the word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi*”. So we see God himself wants to challenge these people with this prophecy of Malachi- the name Malachi means ‘*my messenger*’. And notice with me in verse 2 the first thing God says to these people: “*I have loved you,*” says the Lord’. You get the point- the heart of biblical religion is a personal (love) relationship with God, a deep heart to heart with the living God. *I love you says God*’ with the understanding that we love him back. Now before we get into that some more I want to point out to you how difficult it was for Malachi to bring this prophecy. Verse 1 literally means ‘*The burden of the Word of the Lord*’. An oracle is actually a burden, something difficult to bear. It has the idea of something heavy, a load to be lifted up. God had given Malachi a burden. It was a burden to bear because the Word of the Lord is never something light and fluffy, trifling and entertaining. It is always weighty and serious. I don’t mean dull or boring. It is always substantial, it is of enormous consequence. It’s also a burden because even when it is Good News, the wonderful message of God’s amazing grace, it will be rejected by many, it will meet with opposition. The Word of God, through God’s messenger, is designed for life, eternal life,

but so often, instead as the apostle Paul put it, is the ‘*aroma of death for those who are perishing*’. The Word of God is a two edged sword- and each time a sermon is preached it either brings people closer to God or it condemns them to hell because they won’t receive it. The task of a prophet or a preacher is a heavy burden. For in the bringing of the Word you sense the pain of God, you see again the sin in your own life and in the church and world and realize how it offends God, you sense that even when you preach grace and the love of God, people will say ‘yes, yes’ on Sunday, but then go off and during the week change not one bit, or just outright reject the word; and in doing so deprive themselves of grace in their lives, of spiritual growth and thus the praise God is so richly due. Malachi carried a burden in bringing God’s Word to the people. I share that burden as I bring God’s Word to you today. Please be a people who listen and respond, really respond to God.

God says “I love you”. Does that make you tremble? When God says ‘*I have loved you*’ it’s not some sweet, sentimental love. Through the prophet Isaiah God said “*This is the man to whom I will look, he that is humble and contrite in spirit, and trembles at my word*”. Malachi’s burden is to show us a God whose goodness makes us tremble with reverent fear. Look at what he says in 1:6 “*If then I am a father, where is my honor? And if I am a master, where is my fear? says the Lord of hosts*”. 1:14 “*I am a great King, says the Lord of hosts, and my Name is feared among the nations*”. In other words, Malachi’s burden in this prophecy is to show us a God who makes us tremble with reverent fear; he unfolds the love of God for us in a way that makes us tremble before the majesty of God. If we truly know the awesome creator God who loves us, we will be in awe of him and be deeply moved by his love for us.

That being the case we can see the bad state of affairs in Israel when we see the response to God’s opening statement: verse 2 “*I have loved you, says the Lord. But you ask, how have you loved us?*” Malachi knows very well the people he is dealing with and he says openly what they are thinking but would never dare say outright. God says “I love you” but the people are skeptical, they have their doubts. Throughout this prophecy you will see this pattern, this technique- Malachi will give God’s statement or complaint and then he will state what he knows the people really think (“*But you ask how...?*”) and then give God’s response to that. In a sense his message is a dialogue between God and His people. “*I have loved you*” says the Lord. But you ask “*How have you loved us?*” How can we see it? Are you speaking the same love language as us, God? The people see the tough times they are going through, the former glory days of David and Solomon well and truly gone, returned exiles etching out an existence, derided by the people around them. “*How have you loved us?*” It’s interesting that the people were lax, lethargic, and lenient; their zeal had fizzled and their faith had turned to an empty formalism, but their situation, the lack of real blessing, was the result of their own lack of truly obeying God, they were back to their old tricks before their exile. And yet they blame God. “*How have you loved us?*” Now test yourselves here. How would you answer that question in your own life? How has God loved you? How would you describe God’s love for you? Is your life and family such that you feel as skeptical about God’s loves as the Israelites did? Perhaps we would never dare outright say it, but deep within yourself do you have your doubts? Do you also want to say to God “*How have you love us/me?*” I don’t doubt there is a little of that in all of us. And so it will do us all good to listen to God’s answer, which is almost never heard today.

Look again at verse 2 “*I have loved you says the Lord. But you ask, How have you love us? Was not Esau Jacob’s brother? the Lord says. Yet I have loved Jacob but Esau I have hated...*” Now what sort of an answer is that? Why did God ask “*Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?*” He asked it because he knew the answer would contain the key to the essence of his love. “*Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?*” The answer is Yes! In fact, as every Israelite knew, Esau was not only Jacob’s brother he was his twin. Not only were they twins, Esau was the older one which meant that by all customary rights and privileges he should have been the main heir of Isaac’s blessings. So what is the point of asking ‘*Was not Esau Jacob’s brother?*’ The point is this: God is saying, based on what you and

Esau were in yourselves I could just as easily have chosen Esau as you. Weren't you twins and he the elder? But I chose you and passed him by. "*How have you loved us?*" I have loved you with free, sovereign, unconditional electing love; that is how I have loved you. Freely I chose you for myself above Esau. My love is unconditional; I chose you before you had done anything good or evil. My love for you is sovereign, I was under no constraint to love you; nothing forced me. It was my choice to set my love on you. My love for you is free because it's the overflow of my infinite grace that can never be bought. A student was once reading Romans 9 where Paul quotes this passage "*Jacob have I loved but Esau I hated*". He told his minister that he could not understand why God should hate Esau. The minister replied that he struggled with that verse too, but his difficulty was not that God hated Esau, but that God loved Jacob. How could God love that scheming, deceitful, supplanting scoundrel Jacob? When it says that God '*hated Esau*' it is a Hebrew way of showing contrast, saving one and leaving the other. The reality is that all human beings have failed God and rebel against him, including you and me. That Esau should be left to face judgment is no mystery at all, because we all deserve it. That would be simple justice. The mystery, the amazing grace, is that any one should be saved, that any should be chosen for salvation through Jesus' death and resurrection. Let's think of that question again "*God, how have you loved us?*" What is your experience? Can you answer the way God answered the Israelites? Can you see God's deep, deep love for you in that before the world was even made he had his heart set on you? Has God's Spirit whispered in your heart "*I have loved you*" from before the beginning of time? The word for love here in the Hebrew is a relational word, in the sense of: I have embraced you; God is courting us and pursuing us, even from before time. Max Lucado writes: 'If God had a fridge your picture would be on it.' God loves you and his love never changes because it's not based on your performance but on his perfection. God cannot love you more, nor can he love you less. "*Jacob have I loved, Esau I hated*'. Can you see a world around you, people you know, living in sin, on the road to hell (no different to you), and do you tremble in awe that you have been chosen, loved before time to be saved? Do you tremble at the love of God, at the thought that, at that evangelism rally you heard the preached Word and believed when others didn't; God chose you! Do you tremble at the knowledge that you grew up in a Christian home, with parents who taught you about Jesus, who pleaded every night for you to profess your own faith; that God chose you to have such opportunities. Do you tremble at the love of God as you see him giving his own son to die in your place; the God who lived amongst us, ate with us, shared all of life with us in all its joys and misery and then died on the cross carrying all our guilt, all our sin, all our corruption and failure? Do you tremble before the awesome God who can destroy the entire universe with one word, yet who loves you so deeply it is beyond words?

Do you see what God is saying to his people through Malachi: if I love you why don't you show true love for me? The love of God is not something we can be lethargic about, attend church once in a blue moon, give our leftovers for the work of the kingdom, maybe occasionally read our bibles and talk to God; if we can find the time. As the hymn writer puts it: *Love so amazing, so divine demands my life, my soul, my all*. And as our church motto says "***Like Christ, in all of life***". Before we get into anything else about where we need to be challenged in our home life, church life, work life- and Malachi will speak every strongly and personally about real issues for us still today- we must sort this out first: how is your love relationship with God? What love language are you using to express your devotion to him? Do you tremble at his love for you? Or have you been losing touch with God; do you wonder about his love for you; have you let your devotion to him, your obedience to him, slip and you've been become slack in your faith? Please, feel & hear the burden in God's Word today as he says openly "I love you", and respond to God with your love. Be trembling with reverence and awe, that the majestic creator has set his heart on you. Will you do that today; now?