

**STUDIES IN MALACHI No. 7**  
**Malachi 2:10-16**  
**March 2, 2003**

**Review**

We read last Lord's Day evening the third of Malachi's disputations and made comments on the text. In particular, we took note of the translation of v. 16 and suggested that a better rendering than that given in the NIV is: "For the man who hates and divorces, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of Hosts." In other words, what is being condemned here is not divorce of any kind, for any reason, but what is called "aversion divorce," divorce because the husband simply doesn't like his wife any more or because he would rather be married to another woman. We refer to this reason for divorce nowadays with the catchall term, "incompatibility." The divorces Malachi is condemning were not divorces because of adultery, nor because an unbelieving spouse deserted the marriage and left the believer with no option but to recognize that the marriage was over. These were divorces for aversion and, apparently, such divorces were the lion's share of divorces taking place in Israel in that time.

**Read Text**

Now, in sum, Malachi says that Israel was breaking faith in the matter of marriage in two different respects: Israelite men were marrying outside the faith, creating a spiritually mixed marriage, and they were divorcing their Israelite wives, perhaps in many cases in order to enter into another marriage with a pagan woman, perhaps one who brought property or other forms of wealth with her. They were, therefore violating God's law for marriage both at the beginning, in making the wrong kind of marriages, and at the end, in ending the marriage by divorce when they should have remained faithful to it. In both ways God's covenant was being violated and in both ways the divine law for marriage of believers was being broken.

Marriage, as you know, is a major theme in the Bible. The account of human life in this world begins with a marriage in Genesis 2. And a remarkable thing is said about marriage there. Adam wakes up from his nap, finds Eve prepared for him, rejoices in the great gift that God has given him and says, "This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh..." And, then, the narrator says, "For this reason a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife and they will become one flesh." In other words, that first marriage was the pattern for all marriage. Adam and Eve's marriage was the pattern for all subsequent marriages.

Now, "bone of my bone and flesh of my flesh" is the ancient Hebrew way to say what we say when we speak of someone being our own "flesh and blood." They belong to our family. They share a common bond of life with us. Nothing is closer than flesh and blood. Later in Genesis we read Laban welcoming Jacob to Paddan Aram, where he has fled from his brother Esau, and saying to him, "you are my own bone and flesh," though the NIV, in that place, translates the Hebrew "bone and flesh" with our modern equivalent, "flesh and blood." We say that blood is thicker than water and we mean that there is something sacred, profound, indissoluble about the ties of blood. Your friends may come and go, but your family is for ever. Now, in Adam and Eve's case, they actually did share bone and flesh for she was made from the rib that was taken

out of Adam. But *that* is the narrator's great point about marriage in the next verse. Every marriage creates that same profound relationship. Two people, a man and a woman, who come from completely different families, when they marry create a flesh and blood relationship between them.

Two people *who do not share* the same flesh and blood become one flesh and become a family and create a relationship as profound as that between parents and children or brothers and sisters who literally share the same flesh and blood. Relationships of blood, of course, can be very bad, very troubled: relationships between siblings or between parents and children are sometimes awful. But, what is so profound about the nature of a family, as God created it, is that no matter how bad the relationships within it may become, one cannot escape the family bond. One has parents, like it or not, and one cannot change them. One has siblings and they are forever one's brothers and sisters. It is one of life's injustices, the wag says: "you don't get to choose your relatives." "Relative," it comes from the same root from which "relationship" comes. Family relationships *are the* relationships. We might call anyone you have a relationship with your relative, but we reserve that term for blood relationships, the closest and most profound relationships of all. Now, to be sure, adoption is found in the Bible and in the world, but the great weight placed upon adoption is precisely that it also creates a family, creates a relationship as permanent and as profound as childbirth and parentage does. What makes adoption so significant is that it is another way to the same result: a family.

In Matthew 19, if you remember, our Lord goes back to that passage in Gen. 2 to argue that, from the beginning, marriage was intended to be permanent. Of course it was. Families are permanent and marriage makes a family. That is what is so sinister about the changes underway in marriage law and custom in our society. All of these changes amount to an assault on the divinely made connection between marriage and family. Our present laws create a situation very much more like concubinage in the ancient world, rather than real marriage. A concubine could be kept for various reasons but she was not a wife in the ultimate sense that she did not become a member of the man's family. She was an adjunct to the family, not a member of it. And she, for that reason, could rather easily be disposed of and traded in, like modern marital partners.

This, by the way, is why I will not marry a couple when the wife intends to "keep her name" as they put it nowadays. Marriage according to biblical teaching creates a family. And how do you know you have a family? Well, everyone has the same name! When the wife has one name and the husband has another, you have something else beside a family and so something else besides a biblical marriage. *Now, it is this bottom reality about marriage that explains the Lord's forbidding both of the sins that Malachi here condemns.*

**First**, mixed marriages violate the nature of the intimate relationship that marriage creates. Marriage creates a family and God's people are to serve him in their families. Families are the primary unit of spiritual nurture in the covenant of God because they are the instrument by which and the setting in which children are not only born but raised. Families have a great deal to do, in the economy of God's grace, with the transmission of the faith from one generation to another. They must because of the nature of the relationship between parents and children: the intimacy, the constancy, the dependence, the trust, the example, the instruction that happens in a family and, especially, in a godly family.

To take an unbeliever to wife, to bring into that family circle, in the key role of wife and mother, a woman who does not love God or know his salvation, who does not reverence his Word and law, is to violate the very purpose of a family and render it incapable of being and doing what it has been created for. This is also true at the level of the marriage itself, of course. No unbelieving wife can be what a Christian man needs his wife to be and *vice versa*. But Malachi attacks the sin from the vantage point of the spiritual influence of a family upon children.

Now, lest we miss the importance of this, the Bible reminds us of it again and again. What led to the collapse of the human race at the time of the flood? Spiritually mixed marriages. As often as Christians in love with unbelievers tell themselves that it will be the unbeliever who changes, so often the Bible reminds us that when faith is mixed with unbelief, unbelief virtually always wins out and faith is eventually extinguished. The same thing happened in Israel after the conquest. As often as she was warned not to take to wife the women of the pagan society round about her, so often she did just that and poisoned the well of faith in the rising generations. Solomon was undone by his pagan wives as the Bible explicitly says. Jehoram, the son of the wise and godly King Jehoshaphat, did not follow in his father's steps, we read in 2 Chron. 21:6, "because he married a daughter of Ahab." And it is no surprise, given the mother he had, that Jehoram's son, Ahaziah was no better, in fact, was worse.

So, when we come to the time of Malachi, Ezra, and Nehemiah, these godly men of spiritual wisdom and understanding were not about to let spiritual intermarriage become again the norm in Israel. They were so afraid of that sin that they were willing to do *anything* to stamp it out, including breaking up existing homes and sending wives and mothers away from their husbands and children. It was either great pain and sorrow now, or eternal death for generations to come.

Brownlow North, the Scottish lay evangelist of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, has a sermon on this subject in which he calls this sin, the sin of spiritual intermarriage, the worst sin, the most catastrophic sin of all the sins identified in the Bible that can be committed by a Christian man or woman. In his own words: "in reading my Bible I find no sin there recorded, if we except the sin of our first parents, which has brought greater curse upon the earth, or which is more positively forbidden, both in the Old and New Testament." [*Wilt Thou Go with This man?*, 112] For, you see, that sin corrupts the stream of believing life and may lead to the damnation of thousands, as it did many times in the Bible.

There will be, there have been among the young men and women of this congregation temptations to commit this sin. They foolishly court the temptation by allowing themselves to form a serious attachment to someone who does not love the Lord Jesus, who does not reverence his Word, who has no plan to live according to God's law, who is not going to heaven and has nothing really fundamentally important in common with a Christian. But they are in love. They enjoy being together. There is already a problem, of course, in that the Christian enjoys sharing his or her life at the deepest level with someone who does not know or love the Lord Jesus. Why is that not more of a barrier than it is? Where is the Lord in that Christian's conversation and thinking? Why is it not more distressing that the other is unsaved and has no loyalty to the truth that has set the Christian free? But, nonetheless, the relationship continues and grows. The Christian is somehow sure that the Lord could not forbid something that brings such happiness to

his son or daughter. He tells himself, she tells herself that it is only a matter of time before the unbeliever will put his or her faith in Christ. And so they marry. And in the vast majority of the cases, the unbeliever never comes to faith, but he or she does seriously diminish the faith of the believer and, as the years pass, the children suffer, often, perhaps usually, the children suffer fatally.

God promised himself to those who trust in him and to their children. He made the family, the godly family the instrument of his grace in the children's lives. But a spiritually mixed marriage injects poison into the children's milk. That is why Malachi will not have such marriages in Israel. He knows only too well what their outcome must be in the rising generations. Such marriages are a recipe for spiritual death, not the life that is worthy to be called life, which is the rightful inheritance of the children of those who trust in Christ.

That is the first thing. *The second conclusion* that Malachi rests upon the fundamental nature of marriage as a covenant that, by God's appointment, creates a family is that once made it is not to be unmade. And, in particular, it is never to be unmade for reasons insufficient to set beside the greatness of marriage, the fundamental importance of marriage to the life and welfare of human beings and of the kingdom of God. This, as I said, was the point the Lord Jesus made in Matthew 19, looking back to the first marriage of Adam and Eve. "What God joined together, let no man separate."

Now, stop and think what is being said here. Here is a husband who doesn't like his wife anymore, perhaps he never did. Or, *vice versa*, though in that day it would have been the husbands divorcing their wives, as Malachi's choice of pronoun indicates. "For the man who hates and divorces..." But, in any case, it is an unhappy marriage. And marriage is such a fundamental relationship, it bears so mightily upon a person's happiness, it so dominates our lives, that if the marriage is unhappy, the man or woman is likely to be very unhappy.

Malachi doesn't address this. In the theological and the ethical sense, he doesn't care. Nor does the Lord in Matthew 19 and in Matthew 5. The Bible never discusses this psychological fact of human unhappiness in marriage when it discusses the inviolability of marriage and when it forbids divorce. Christians in our day need to face this fact, for fact it is. To put it as bluntly as the Bible does, the Lord is as much as saying, I know you are unhappy but your unhappiness does not change your obligation to your marriage. I know you think your life would be much better if you were out of this marriage or could have another woman for your wife, but that does not in any way diminish your obligation to remain faithful to your wife.

Listen, "the Lord knows our frame. He remembers that we are dust." He is full of a perfect sympathy for the trials and tribulations of human life. There can be no thought of his not caring for the pain caused to his children who find themselves in a loveless marriage. He wants us to be happy. *But, he wants us to be holy even more!* And, the fact is, there are a great many things that are very hard to do in the Christian life but which Christians must do, come wind, come weather. No one can read the Bible and conclude that the Lord would never ask his children to suffer for his sake, to make sacrifices for his sake, even punishingly difficult sacrifices.

I have no idea why the Lord should order such a steep and difficult climb for some and such a smooth valley path for others. But he does and he tells us in his Word that he does. I have no idea why some Christians have simply wonderful marriages and others do not. I can sometimes tell where the difficulties came from, but I don't know why the Lord, with his almighty power, did not spare that couple as he spared others. We sang this evening the lovely hymn Charles Wesley wrote for his wife on her birthday. Charles had a fine marriage. If his brother John, had been as gifted a poet as Charles, he would never have written such a hymn. It wouldn't have occurred to him. He had a very bad marriage. John Wesley's wife was five days in her grave before he knew she was dead. Who can explain this? But, what I do know is that the Lord never sets aside the obligation of fidelity to a marriage because of the unhappiness of one spouse with another or of both with each other. He simply never does.

At another place we could well, from many texts of Holy Scripture, consider how Christians should approach unwelcome and difficult situations in their lives, how to manage and how to sanctify a marriage that has grown cold or, perhaps, was never warm. We could speak of the Lord never tempting us beyond what we are able, or of his grace restoring the years the locusts have eaten. But, what we have before us is the clear statement of his law and *that* is what we must attend to this evening. *No Christian is ever free to leave his or her marriage because he or she does not want to be married, at least to this particular spouse, because he or she is unhappy in the marriage, or because the marriage is loveless.* Christians are those people who revere the Bible as the very Word of God. In that Word, this message is clear, emphatic, repeated, and never contradicted. So, that is where we begin and end. Christian marriages last. Period.

Now, clearly there are reasons why God has attached this inviolability to marriage. Chief among them, as Malachi suggests here, is that marriage is an institution that bears not only on the private happiness and welfare of individuals, but bears on its shoulders the welfare of the society as a whole. Each divorce diminishes, weakens the society and, especially, the Christian society. It is this fact that, perhaps especially, explains the very strong statement in the second half of v. 16, viz: "he who hates and divorces...*covers his garment with violence.*" We said last week that that phrase, "cover one's garment with violence" is the equivalent of our "blood on one's hands." Such a person is obviously guilty of a great crime against humanity, against the kingdom of God. Marriage is that important! In the church, to her people, to her young people growing up, the blessings of the covenant and of salvation, from one generation to another, depend upon stable marriages. And stable and healthy marriages begin, only begin but definitely begin with an absolute commitment to inviolability.

And, there is this also. Women have equal rights. In the Bible men are not free to solve what they see to be their own problems on the backs of their wives. Malachi rings the changes on this point. She is your covenant partner. You cannot break faith with her. A healthy society and a healthy kingdom of God require that men respect women and protect them. Divorce, even in our feminist day, is almost universally harder on women than on men. That is another reason why an individual couple may not divorce in order to seek greater happiness for themselves. The faithfulness of each marriage impinges on the health of the society as a whole.

I am reading a fascinating book by Vishal and Ruth Mangalwadi. Vishal, as you know, has close connections with L'Abri, being an Indian who became a Christian in part through the written

ministry of Francis Schaeffer. The title of the book is *The Legacy of William Carey: A Model for the Transformation of a Culture*. And in the book is a chapter entitled: “William Carey: A Tribute by an Indian Woman.” Ruth wrote that chapter.

In this chapter Mrs. Mangalwadi describes the situation of women in India before Carey arrived and before Christian influences began to bite into the prevailing paganism. And she warns that with the revival of Hindu nationalism, the condition of women is beginning to return to that former degraded state.

“*Kali*, the goddess of death, is the patron deity of Calcutta and most other parts of Bengal where Carey came with the good news of a God who died to give us life. Divinity was perceived in Bengal as *Ardhanareeshwara* – half male and half female – and yet women there were held in the lowest possible esteem. As a contemporary journalist Shakuntala Narasimhan put it so aptly in her book on *sati*: “[Woman] was deified in the abstract and demeaned in real life.”

“It has been stated often enough that, “In Hinduism there is no salvation for Woman until she be reborn a man.” Her only hope lies in serving man in complete self-abnegation. Female infanticide, child marriage, *purdah*, dowry, and *sati* were everyday realities accepted as normal by the learned pundits and illiterate masses. What was the common thread that linked all these practices together? Obviously an ignorance of the truth that woman shares with man the glory of being in God’s own image; and the consequent diabolical trivialization of woman’s God-given dignity. To quote, again, Shakuntala Narasimhan’s description of the treatment of women:

Smothered or poisoned at birth, given away in marriage at a tender age, bargained over like some commodity by dowry-hungry in-laws, secluded in the name of chastity and religion, and finally burned for the exaltation of the family’s honour, or shunned as [an] inauspicious widow, the burden of oppression took different stages of a woman’s life, from birth to death in a chain of attitudes linked by contempt for the female.

It was into this situation that Carey brought the gospel and one by one the horrific practices that condemned Indian women to early death or slavish existence were banned. In Hinduism the husband is *patidev* – the woman’s god. Her life ceased to be valuable after her husband’s death. The woman’s goal was to serve her man or men well in hopes of being reborn, as a man, and to be able, then, to search for salvation. This and the value of a woman as a sex object led also to the practice of child marriage. In the last 19<sup>th</sup> century census in the state of Bengal, there were 10,000 widows under the age of four and more than 50,000 between the ages of five and nine. Childhood was denied a girl. She had to pass into motherhood before she had time to grow as a person. [38]

The Bible offers a completely different view. It teaches us that from the beginning God made man male and female in his own image. Both man and woman bear the image of God. Both are given life to serve him. This is the fundamental reality that lies behind Malachi’s teaching here.

So, when brought into marriage, they are brought, the man and the woman alike, as *partners* in a covenant. A man who does not remain faithful to his wife has not only broken faith with *her*, he has broken faith *with God!* He has subverted the divinely ordained order for human life, which order requires a stable marriage, covenantal partnership between husband and wife, and the creation of family to be a vehicle of divine grace. A husband who divorces his wife because he doesn't want to be married to her anymore, or because he prefers another woman, *has blood on his hands*. His sin is against God and his wife and his society and the entire kingdom of God.

India provides only one good example of the misery that eventuates when God's rule of marriage is not kept and when faithfulness is not required of men and women. Our society is now providing another example. Islam provides another. The true dignity and meaning of human life depends upon the woman being regarded as equally a divine image-bearer and upon marriage being regarded as creating a family, the circle of love and faithfulness that God made the fundamental unit of human society and a primary instrumentality of human earthly welfare and eternal salvation.

Israel was in great danger of losing the blessing that comes from human life as ordered by God because it had grown lax in the sacred and all-important matter of maintaining God's standards for fidelity in marriage. Malachi condemned them for this in the sternest language possible and summoned them to be true to their marriages as God requires. Our society, including our Christian society is near to making the same catastrophic error. Malachi speaks to our day as surely as he spoke to his own and his warnings need to be taken to heart by us as surely as they needed to be taken to heart by his own contemporaries. Society and Christian society will inevitably unravel if the divine law for marriage is disobeyed! And that unraveling will darken and ruin the lives of untold multitudes.

But, says the husband or wife, "what if I don't love my spouse?" One answer is Malachi's stern answer: It doesn't make any difference. You have a command to keep. God has made marriage of immense importance and you are not free to tamper with it. Where were you when God created man, male and female, and led them together into a marriage that became the pattern for all marriage in this world? Who are you to question God's wisdom and goodness?

But there is surely another answer. I leave you with this from C.S. Lewis:

"Love as distinct from 'being in love' is not merely a feeling. It is a deep unity, maintained by the will and deliberately strengthened by habit; reinforced by (in Christian marriages) the grace which both partners ask, and receive from God. they can have this love for each other even at those moments when they do not like each other; as you love yourself even when you do not like yourself."  
[*Mere Christianity*, 99]

Don't say it cannot be done. Vast multitudes of Christians have done it.