

A Prophet for the Bible Belt

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Hello, and thank you for joining us for another online sermon here at Grace Fellowship Church. As you know, we've been doing this for about a year, recording messages and putting them online. It's kind of crazy, because who knew that the Coronavirus would go on for a year. When it first started, a lot of us thought it would last for a few weeks. And that would be it. Or a few months, and then it would be over, but we were wrong. This is gone on since March of 2020.

On November 19, our provincial health officer, Bonnie Henry, issued a state of emergency ordering all churches and non-essential services in BC to close to flatten the curve of the corona virus. That changed the nature of the discussion because before they had *asked* us to close, now they were *ordering* us to do it. It was a demand that was enforceable by law, which is the first time we have ever seen this in our history. To my knowledge this is the first time that this has ever occurred in British Columbia. They did the same thing again on December 7.

But things are getting pretty tense right now. They are getting uncomfortable in a lot of areas. Because for most of our history, Canada has been pretty hands-off with the church. For most of its history, it has given us a lot of freedom and a lot of liberty, but not with this this issue. Due to the threat of the corona virus, the government has decided to close the public gathering of the church temporarily.

And it raises the question, how is the church supposed to respond to this? How is the church supposed to respond to these types of encounters with the government? Do we comply or do we not? Do we say yes, go along with it and submit, or do we resist? It is a big issue right now. How is the church supposed to respond to anything the government does? How is the church supposed to respond to any issue that's raised by the governing authorities? It doesn't have to be related to the corona virus.

I mean, if you think about it, the government asks us to do lots of things on a daily basis. They ask us to obey the speed limit, pay our taxes, don't litter, don't throw trash on the side of the road, and we could go on and on. The list is endless.

What is the church supposed to do with all of that? What are we supposed to do with laws, just any kind of law? And to answer that next week, we are going to start a new series here at Grace called the Christian and the government. What does God expect us to do? What is He requiring of us?

I don't think I have to tell you that this is really nothing new in human history. People have experienced this since the dawn of time. The church has always had a touchy relationship with the government in some ways. So, the Word of God gives us a lot of wisdom and counsel. And that is what we are going to look at in this series. And as we do that, we are going to look at several things like, what is the role of the government? And what is the role of the church? The two have always existed; they have always been together, and they've often clashed.

We're going to talk about what part the kingdom of God plays in this. What part the government play in this. There is a kingdom of God, and there is a kingdom of man. There is a government of God where is in charge, and He rules and He calls the shots. And there is a government where man on some level calls the shots in his own limited capacity. And we're going to talk about how the two go together. It's my goal to encourage you with this information. It's not my goal to be controversial, but rather calm things down a little bit. I know a lot of people are very upset over this issue. But the good news is you don't have to be. As a child of God, you don't have to be jittery. Because the Bible has answers for you. It gives you a firm foundation to stand on.

I want to invite you to open your Bible to a book that really sets the stage for what we're going to talk about in this series. And that's the book of Malachi, the last book in the Old Testament. It might surprise you to open to a book like this. This is not something we normally do on Sunday mornings; not a book that we normally look at, but I'll explain why we're doing that in just a moment. First, I want to read the passage to you.

Malachi chapter 1:

The oracle of the word of the LORD to Israel through Malachi.

² "I have loved you," says the LORD But you say, "How have You loved us?" "Was not Esau Jacob's brother?" declares the LORD "Yet I have loved Jacob; ³ but I have hated Esau, and I have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness." ⁴ Though Edom says, "We have been beaten down, but we will return and build up the ruins"; thus says the LORD of hosts, "They may build, but I will tear down; and men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the LORD is indignant forever." ⁵ Your eyes will see this and you will say, "The LORD be magnified beyond the border of Israel!"

⁶ "A son honors his father, and a servant his master Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is My respect?' says the LORD of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, 'How have we despised Your name?' ⁷ "You are presenting defiled food upon My altar But you say, 'How have we defiled You?' In that you say, 'The table of the LORD is to be despised.' ⁸

"But when you present the blind for sacrifice, is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick, is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts. ⁹ "But now will you not entreat God's favor, that He may be gracious to us? With such an offering on your part, will He receive any of you kindly?" says the LORD of hosts. ¹⁰

"Oh that there were one among you who would shut the gates, that you might not uselessly kindle fire on My altar! I am not pleased with you," says the LORD of hosts, "nor will I accept an offering from you. ¹¹ "For from the rising of the sun even to its setting, My name will be great among the nations, and in every place incense is going to be offered to My name, and a grain offering that is pure; for My name will be great among the nations," says the LORD of hosts.

¹² "But you are profaning it, in that you say, 'The table of the Lord is defiled, and as for its fruit, its food is to be despised.' ¹³ "You also say, 'My, how tiresome it is!' And you disdainfully sniff at it," says the LORD of hosts, "and you bring what was taken by robbery and what is lame or sick; so you bring the offering! Should I receive that from your hand?" says the LORD. ¹⁴ "But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock

and vows it, but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord, for I am a great King," says the LORD of hosts, "and My name is feared among the nations."

We will end the reading there. Our men just finished going through the minor prophets on Saturday mornings in our Iron Man's Bible study. They were so convicted by it, some of them asked me to teach it to you on Sunday morning.

A couple of details about the book: The name Malachi means "messenger" in Hebrew, or "angel". That's what an angel is. He is a messenger, a courier between heaven and earth. Just like a heavenly UPS man or a postal worker, he delivers the mail for God and brings it to your door. That's what Malachi did. That is what his name means. Some think Malachi was actually an angel. That was a view of some scholars in the early church. But you don't really have to take it that far, because he's an ordinary guy.

If you notice verse one starts off just like any Old Testament book. It says, "The oracle of the Word of the Lord, to Israel through Malachi". The word "oracle" could mean prophecy or even burden. That's kind of a normal way to begin an Old Testament book. But there was something special about his message. He was the last prophet in the Old Testament to preach in Israel for more than 400 years. After Malachi, Israel would enter into a time that's known as the years of silence. No word came from the Lord for more than 400 years, until John the Baptist appeared. So, from Malachi until John the Baptist, total silence in Israel, as far as God's speaking is concerned. It means that Malachi's message was the last thing they heard from God for 400 years. It would have been burned into their brains, ringing in their ears.

And what he says here is so important. What he says in chapter one is so essential. He says, You guys don't care! You are apathetic You are indifferent. You have totally checked out on the things of God.

Look down in verse 6, it says this: a son honors his father and a servant, his master. And if I'm a father, where's my honor? And if I'm a master, where's my respect? Now, I don't even have to explain that to you for you to get the point. The tone says it all. They don't care. They just don't care. The Jews have gotten to a point in their history when they are fed up with the things of God. They are not giving Him honor. They are not giving him respect. They are just going through the motions. Just showing up at the temple. Later on, verse 7 says they're presenting defiled food, blind and lame sacrifices. That means sacrifices they are going to throw away anyway. Verse 12 says they are profaning it.

"This is so boring", they're saying as they go to the temple. That is the state of Israel at the end of the Old Testament. 1000 years of history and this is what it comes to. A whole millennia of time for the Jews, as far as their history is concerned, and this is where they end up.

And we could add that this is even more important when you consider the details of the book when you get the background in mind. Malachi wrote during the time of Ezra and Nehemiah when the Jews were coming back from their exile into Babylon. Back to building the temple and repopulating the area and all these wonderful things, which means this should have been a time of celebration for them. This should have been a time of joy and happiness and excitement about the things of God and instead you have this. Instead, they are acting like they don't care.

As a result, the Lord says this to them in verse 10: Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the gates (that means the gates of the temple), that you might not uselessly kindle fires on my altar.

This is a shocking thing to read. The Jews are building the temple, as he said this. In the midst of all that, God says, I want you to stop it. I want you to cut it out. Shut the gates, bar them up, lock the doors. Why? Because you are apathetic, Israel. You are apathetic.

Some of you will remember the Lord's words to the church at Laodicea in Revelation chapter 3. There he says: Because you are neither hot nor cold, because you are lukewarm, I'm about to spit you out of my mouth. That's the only time I'm aware of in the Bible where God tells somebody, "you make me want to puke". And He says that to a church, to an entire church who were acting like this.

This happens at the end of the Old Testament. It happens at the end of the New Testament. The church doesn't care anymore. It's totally checked out on God. And here is the point. Here's what this has to do with the church and the government and this new series that we're going to be starting next week.

So many people are advocating for the church to reopen right now. So many people in the US and Canada, and other parts of the world probably, are saying that we need to meet and be together and make that a priority. And I would agree with them. Let me just say that upfront. The church needs to meet at some point; it needs to be together. The church can stay close for a while to keep everyone safe, and we've done that here at Grace. We've stayed close for a season and we'll do it as long as we can to help. But you can't do it forever. You do need to meet, but not like this. That's the point here. This is the takeaway. The church does not need to meet like this in a cold and indifferent and apathetic way.

Malachi says here, it would be better to keep the doors closed and to not ever reopen at all. Kind of makes you wonder how many churches would stay closed forever if they would heed the words of this book. How many churches should never meet again because they are in this state of lukewarm Christianity. "Churchianity", some people call it.

I mentioned this because I've met people who want to fight over all this right now. They want to argue and wrestle and debate about whether the church should meet or not. And they do it on Facebook and on social media and over email and the phone. But when the church is open, they don't come. Because the church and God has nothing to do with it. They just want to argue.

I've talked to other people who want to come to church. I mean, they show up every week. They are here every Sunday. very faithful, very consistent, but later on you find out that they're cheating on their spouse. Later on, you find out that they are living in sin. It's all a lie. It's all a sham. The church has nothing to do with that either. They are in the church, but the church is not in them. They're coming to worship just for show. And my friends, let me just say at the beginning of this, that God hates it when we do that.

God hates it when we come to His church that way. He can't stand it, it makes Him sick, it makes Him want to puke because it's all fake. Just like it was with Israel just like it was with His people back then. You need to come for the right reasons or you shouldn't come. You need to come here because you mean it, your heart is in it, and you want to honor God. God despises half-hearted worship. He didn't love you half-heartedly, so don't treat Him that way.

I told you last week, this is such a big deal for us because we live in the Bible Belt here in Chilliwack. In fact, this sermon is called "A Prophet for the Bible Belt", because I think that's what Malachi was in many ways. We live in one of the most religious parts of the country. According to the latest count, there are more than 60 different churches here. Which comes to about one for every four kilometers. There is one church for every two and a half miles in Chilliwack. That's a lot of religion.

If you are not careful, you can get the wrong idea that you are a Christian simply because you go to church. You can get the wrong idea that you are saved, religious, holy and spiritual, just because you show up and sit in a building like this. Even though you don't mean it or care. Here, the Bible says the total opposite. That kind of attitude is always despised and rejected in the Scripture.

The prophet Samuel told King Saul, the first king of Israel: God does not delight in sacrifices, as much as in obedience. You have to be sincere, or you shouldn't come to church at all. It's just totally different from the way we think. It's totally different from the way most people think. Most people think it's a good thing to come to church. A positive thing in your life. But Malachi says not if you do it like this. God would rather you not come.

If you are taking notes, in Malachi chapter one, we are going to look at three reasons to come to church. Just to be brutally honest, I don't think everybody understands this. Going to church doesn't save you. Going to church doesn't make you a Christian, any more than going to a garage makes you a car. The issue is why do you go? The issue is what is it that makes you want to come there? What is your motivation? What is your heart behind it? That is what God wants to know. If you want to know what true religion is to God, it is a religion of the heart. It is a religion of the soul. John says God is Spirit, and his worshipers must worship Him in spirit. God doesn't want your body when you worship, he wants your heart. He wants your soul.

He doesn't just want your physical presence. He wants your attention. He wants your devotion. It's not true worship if you don't get that. It's not the real thing. Jesus didn't die, just so you could come and stick it to the government. Jesus didn't die so you could go out to a church and stand up for your rights and put everybody in their place. He died for something bigger than that. He died for something greater than that. He died for the glory of God. He died for His worship.

The first reason to come to church is to honor God. You should come to church to glorify Him and nothing else. You should come to church to worship Him and praise Him and lift His name on high. That is the whole intention here.

Malachi chapter one says "The oracle of the Word of the Lord to Israel through Malachi. I've loved you says the LORD, but you say how have you loved us? Was not Esau Jacob's brother? declares the Lord, and I've loved you. But I've hated Esau and have made his mountains a desolation and appointed his inheritance for the jackals of the wilderness. Though Edom says, We have been beaten down but we will return and rebuild the ruins. Thus says the Lord of hosts, they may build, but I will tear it down. And men will call them the wicked territory, and the people toward whom the Lord is indignant forever. Your eyes will see this, and you will say The Lord be magnified beyond the border of Israel. A son honors his father and a servant, his master. If I'm a father, where's my honor? And if I'm a master, where's my respect? says the Lord of Hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name."

When you first read this passage, it may sound a little odd to you. This is not a book that we normally study on Sundays. The setting is a little foreign to us. This was written toward the end of the Old Testament.

Malachi is writing in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah when the Jews are coming back to the land from their exile. And as they are brought back, what is their attitude to all this? Well, here it says, they're talking back to God. They're arguing with him. It's kind of ironic that in many ways they left to exile, arguing with God and fighting Him, and they come back fighting Him. One long fight. In fact, the name Israel means "he struggles with God". That's who they were. They were struggling with Him and wrestling with Him all their history.

In verse 2, the Lord says: I have loved you, but they say, how have you loved us? The Lord says, I care about you. You mean a lot to me. And they say, prove it. We don't believe you. We don't see it. Which is an insulting thing to say to God, isn't it? It's a terrible thing to say to Him after all He's done. But in His kindness, the Lord answers their objection here. And the reminder is that, "I chose Jacob over Esau". It is what he says here.

I chose the Israelites, or the descendants of Jacob over the descendants of Esau. They were His off spring. The Jews were complaining that God had wronged them. They were complaining that he had mistreated them by taking them off into exile. And now the Lord says in response, but you're still here, Israel and the Edomites are not, or they won't be for long. You're still around, but they're going to be gone soon. Because verse four says, I've appointed his inheritance for jackals. That means the land that Esau is supposed to have or Edom is supposed to have, it's going to be a wilderness. He says, they may build but I will tear down. And your eyes will see this and say the Lord, be magnified.

I mean, I don't know about you, but I've never met an Edomite. Have you? I've never met a descendant from Esau. But you've met a Jew, you have met an Israelite. That's what the Lord is saying here. God has not totally abandoned the Jews. And after saying this for a few verses, after going back and forth with them, (the Lord says something, Israel says something, the Lord says something) they argue again. After doing this, He finally says in verse 6, "a son honors his father and a servant his master than if I'm a father, where's my honor?" In other words, I don't like it when you speak to me that way, Israel. It's not honorable. It's not respectful. It's rude. I don't like it. So, cut it out. You would not talk to your father that way. Don't talk to me that way, God said. You would not talk to your master that way, and I'm your Master. So, stop treating me like that.

And here is the point here. Here is the lesson that Malachi is trying to teach us, or anybody else in the generations that come, that reads his prophecy. We shouldn't do this either. We shouldn't treat God the way Israel did with such disrespect and such dishonor.

We are still around, aren't we? The church is still here, too. Even though we are going through a trial right now, even though we are going through a difficult time, maybe the most difficult time in modern memory, we haven't gone anywhere. The church has not disappeared, because God has loved us. He could say the same thing to us that He said to Israel here. He could say, I have loved you. So, we have no right to complain, we have no right to talk back either to God. We need to honor Him.

So many religions, throughout the years, have dried up and died. So many faith systems and ideas have been wiped off the face of the earth never to be seen again. The Greeks and the Romans: where are their gods? Where's Zeus? Where's Hades? Where's Apollos? Or the gods in the Israelite's days. The baals and the Canaanite false gods. Where's dagon? They're all gone. But the church is here. It's never disappeared, because of God. Not because of us, but because of him. Not because we did anything special, but because He is.

And we need to talk to and think of the Lord that way. When we are in a trial, when we are in a hard time, we need to speak to Him with respect, reverence, honor, and glory, at all times. I make a point of this because I'm afraid some people don't get this today. We are so prone to complain right now. We are so prone to grumble and argue with God just like the Jews did. Because God says, I have loved you. And what do we say? How have You loved us? He says I care about you. You mean a lot to me. What do we say? Prove it! I don't see it. Look how hard this is right now. A worldwide pandemic on our hands. We have the government cracking down on us. People getting sick. Conspiracy theories are everywhere right now. How have You loved us?

If you talk to people right now, even some average Christians about what's going on, one common reaction you often find is anger. People are mad. They want to know how can the government do this to me?? Just who do they think they are?? But the problem with that is if you're not careful, it's easy to start talking to God that way. You say, how can you do this to me God? How can You treat me this way? Just who do You think You are??

And the point Malachi is making here at the very start of his book, is that you don't ever want to do that to God. You don't ever want to talk that way to the Lord of heaven and earth. You should be more respectful to your father than that, to your master than that, but especially to God. This is disrespectful in the highest sense. You need to come to church with a whole different attitude.

Listen friends, God did not take this kind of lip from Israel and He's not going to take it from you. He didn't take this surly, nasty, mean attitude from the Jews. He is not going to take it from the likes of you and me.

You need to remember that, you need to take this very, very seriously. If this pandemic goes on, if it continues for a long, long time, let this chapter and these verses be burned into your brain that your heart never starts doing this. Ever. Ever!

It is real sad that the Jews had just escaped a tragedy and they were talking like this to God. And friends, in many ways, we are in a tragedy, but in other ways, it is not the kind of pandemic some were thinking it might have been. I'm not trying to minimize anything right now. I'm just saying it's better than some have anticipated. And we are talking like this too. We're talking to God the same way Israel did. And you don't ever want to come to church like this.

This was something the early Christians got very well because they were very reverent in the way they went to church. The early Christians were very somber, they did not come flippantly or recklessly. They came to church in a very somber way. You would even think they were coming to a funeral they were so serious about this thing. As they walked or traveled on camel or horseback to the services, they would use the time to pray and meditate and examine their heart. They would use the time to beat their breasts and confess their sin and get right with God. They did that on their way to church. They weren't even there yet. Because they understood that this is a serious thing. The worship of God is a very holy thing, and it needs to be treated that way. You have to treat it with the same kind of respect, or else the whole thing is worthless. You have to treat God the way He deserves.

I'll never forget the time I met a man at a church in the States. He was just kind of passing through the church I worked at. And I asked him why he came, what brought him to us. And he said, "I'm so hungry for God". That was probably seven years ago, but I still remember it to this day. Because of my whole time

working in church, I have never heard anybody say that. I have never heard anybody say, "I came here for God".

Most of the time, people are coming to church for their friends, or their family. A lot of times they're coming because of a program, or maybe some event, or the holidays. A lot of times people show up at churches for Christmas. This man said, "I'm here for God". And my friends, you need to come to church for the same reason. You need to come to church with the same priorities. We are here because we are hungry for God. That comes first and foremost, above all else.

The first principle is to honor God. These are principles we are drawing out of the Old Testament; they would have taken this for the temple. Which means that we should come to glorify God and bring Him praise and lift His name on high. You shouldn't come to church because you're angry or upset or want to make a stand on something. You come here because you are hungry for Him. That is what the church is for.

Another reason to come to church is to offer pure sacrifices. You should come to church to give something back to God. After all God has done for you, after all He has given you, the least you can do is give Him something back. And it needs to be pure and holy, which is what we are going to see here.

If you read on in verse 6, he says, "a son honors his father and a servant his master. Then if I'm a father, where is my honor, and if I'm a master where is my respect, says the Lord of hosts to you, oh priests who despise My name. But you say how have we despised Your name? You are presenting defiled food upon My altar. But you say how have we defiled You? In that you say, the table of the Lord is to be despised. But when you present the blind for sacrifice is it not evil? And when you present the lame and sick is it not evil? Why not offer it to your governor? Would he be pleased with you? Or would he receive you kindly, says the Lord of hosts? But now will you not entreat God's favor that He may be gracious to you with such an offering on your part? Will He receive any of you kindly, says the Lord of Hosts.

As you go on in the book of Malachi, one thing you notice is that Malachi writes in a very unusual style. He's being sarcastic. What he says is so blunt, harsh and direct, that the best way to take it is with a little humor. The best way to soften the blow is with a little irony, which is how he writes.

And just to explain what he says here, in verse six, the Lord accuses Israel of not honoring Him. We just talked about that. He accuses them of being disrespectful. And as an example of that, he says in verse 7, you are presenting defiled food on My altar. That means, you are presenting dirty food to God that is unfit or unclean to eat. Jews had a list of types of food you could eat and make sacrifice of. These were defiled foods they were giving to God.

In verse 8 he says, that when you present the blind for sacrifice is not this evil? And when you present the lame and the sick, is it not the same? That may not mean a lot to some of us, if you don't come from an agricultural background, but if you do, you get the significance of this. A blind animal is worthless. A blind animal is useless to a farmer because he can't do anything with it. If it is blind or lame, the animal can't get around, it can't move on its own. And if it's sick, he can't eat it. If the animal is sick, it may be contagious, it may spread disease. You can't use it for meat. The only thing you can do with an animal like this is to kill it. Put it out of its misery because it's going to starve on its own, anyway. Or die of the sickness or spread the sickness.

This is what the Jews were offering to God. They were bringing Him animals that they were going to kill anyway. As they were coming to the temple after their exile, as a temple is being raised from the ground, this is what they are bringing in their worship to the Lord. They are bringing Him trash. Garbage, essentially. Sacrifices that are worthless in the eyes of God. This is not a real sacrifice. This is not a real investment, because it didn't cost them anything. They didn't have to pay anything for these animals. So God didn't want it.

He said, why not offer it to your governor? That means the governor that would have been ruling over them from Persia. Why not give those animals to him? Would he want them? Of course not! God says, absolutely not! So why should I?!

That's adding insult upon injury, isn't it? As you go on in this chapter, it is just one slap in the face after another to God. First, they are arguing with Him. Then they are saying, "You don't love us". Then they are not honoring Him. And now what are they doing? They are giving him these kinds of offerings!

One commentator said it this way. We serve a living God. And as such, our God demands living sacrifices. He doesn't want dead ones. That is what the Jews are offering God here. They are giving Him animals that are as good as dead. They are giving Him animals that have no life in them anyway. God doesn't want them.

And here is the application to this. God doesn't want this from us either. God doesn't want this kind of sacrifice and offering from the likes of you and me. He doesn't want a dead sacrifice from you. He doesn't want a piece of trash. He wants more than that. He wants the best that you have.

I don't have to tell you that we don't make offerings the same way that Jews did. It looks different for us. You understand you didn't bring a lamb or a bull to worship this morning to sacrifice. You understand that is finished. But we do bring other sacrifices to God. Like our integrity. Like our sincerity and the cleanness of our heart. Our repentance and confession, and our living a right, holy life before the Lord. We bring all these things to God. And Malachi says, that's what He wants. He demands your very best.

Romans 12 says we are to give God a living, holy sacrifice. And the idea there is it's a sacrifice that goes on and on. Romans 12:1 says, Therefore I urge you brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies a living and holy sacrifice, acceptable to God, which is your spiritual service of worship.

And that phrase, spiritual service, the idea there is that the Jews had a physical service. We understand that. They brought physical offerings. We have a spiritual one. We bring spiritual offerings to God, a living and holy sacrifice. It is our holy life that we give to God. It is our living sacrifice, which means you don't get to crawl down off the altar. You don't get to stop giving the sacrifice, you're just always give it to God. That's what He demands. That's what He wants from us.

I mentioned this because this is such a problem today. It's such an issue in a place like the Bible Belt. So many people think they are a Christian just because they come to church. We just talked about that. So many people think they are pleasing God and honoring Him just because they show up. They are not giving anything. They are not sacrificing anything. They are just coming for two hours on a Sunday morning, and then they go home. And that's it. That's all the religion they have. All the while they are living in sin. All the while they are committing adultery, getting drunk. They are liars, cheats, swindlers and on and on.

Now, (Malachi) says you can't worship God that way. Book of Romans says you can't worship God that way. The whole Bible says that. There is no sacrifice in that. It doesn't cost you anything to do that...coming to church for two hours a week. That is like giving God a dead animal. It is like giving God your trash.

I've heard some stories in our town and in the Bible Belt where I grew up in the southern United States, where people get drunk on a Saturday night, then they are in church on Sunday morning. That is trash. That's garbage. God doesn't want that. Your governor doesn't. Nobody wants that.

God wants so much more. In fact, right after this, you can see what the Lord thinks of this type of worship. In verse 10, this is what we read: Oh, that there were one among you who would shut the temple gates that you might not uselessly kindle fires on my altar.

That phrase "uselessly kindle fires on my altar", is a Hebrew word which means useless, or vain or pointless. It means something that has served no point at all, no purpose at all. God says that to come to Him with this type of worship is pointless. So don't even do it, He said. Shut the temple gates. Close the doors and put a lock on them.

We really need to hear this today because I hear people say from time to time around here, "well, at least they're coming to church. I know they are living in sin. I know they are living like a hypocrite. I know they are a fake. I know they don't mean it. But at least they are coming to church." Can I just tell you, my friends, God never says that. Ever! He never makes that type of claim. He says, Come because you mean it, or don't come. He says, come because it's real to you, or stay home.

Sobering thing to think about, but there's times that some folks are in the church and God doesn't want them there. I mean, other people say, it's better for them to be here than elsewhere. It's better for them to be in church than to be at the bar or at the club. God doesn't say that either. That's not how He looks at His church. You need to bring living sacrifices to God; you need to bring Him the best that you have.

This is a serious passage that we are looking at today. This is a serious sermon because we serve a serious God. We serve a God who is serious about His temple and His worship. In fact, one of the first things Jesus did when He started His ministry, and one of the last things He did at the end of His ministry, before He was crucified, was to cleanse the temple. It's one of the only times in the gospels where you read about Jesus being angry. You would think He would come to the temple and be happy; you would think He would come into the house of God and be exuberant about what He saw there. It was the total opposite. He was so furious that He drove everybody out twice. Once in the beginning, and once in the end, because he came with this kind of mentality. He came to His house, to His Father's house with this kind of mindset. Get it right or get out.

That is why they crucified Him, by the way. It's one of the reasons. The Pharisees, Sadducees, all the religious leaders, the religious hypocrites, could not take that from Him. But that's how God looks at his church. Judgment begins at the house of God. Starts right here. And that leads us to another point to consider this morning.

First reason to come to church is to honor Him, which means you should come to glorify Him and give Him praise and honor and worship. Second reason is to give Him pure sacrifices, which means you should come to offer something. After all He has done for you, you need to give Him something back. And it looks like the best that you have. It looks like the best sheep or lamb or goat, or life that you can live for God. Give Him a

holy and living sacrifice as a Christian. Every moment of your day should be a sacrificial offering to God. Every moment of your existence should be something you are giving back to Him in worship. Because He deserves it.

A third and a final reason to come to church in the first chapter of Malachi is that you should come to make His name great, which means you should come to magnify Him. This is kind of repeating some of the things we have looked at this morning. We should come to exalt His name, so people will look at you and say, "what a mighty God he serves, what a mighty God she serves". They need to see something different in you.

We won't say much about this one because this encompasses all the other ones. But if you look in verse 10, there it says, oh, that there were one among you who would shut the gates that you might not uselessly kindle fires on my altar. I'm not pleased with you says the Lord of hosts, nor will I accept an offering from you. For from the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name will be great among the nations. And in every place incense is going to be offered to my name, and a grain offering that is pure, for my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you are profaning it in that you say the table of the Lord is defiled. And as for its fruit, its food is to be despised. You also say how tiresome it is. And you disdainfully sniff it says the Lord of Hosts, and you bring what was taken by robbery and what is lame or sick, so you bring the offering. Should I receive that from your hand, says the Lord. But cursed be the swindler who has a male in his flock and vows it but sacrifices a blemished animal to the Lord. For I'm a great Kings, says the Lord of Hosts, and my name is feared among the nations.

As you read on in this chapter, Malachi drops a note of sarcasm here at the end. He says it is time to stop playing games now. This is not funny anymore. This is the reason why God is mad with Israel because they are treating the temple with contempt and scorn. One of the reasons God brought them back into the land was the temple. And this is what they are doing with it. They are sniffing disdainfully at it. That's the idea of sniffing up your nose. And they are saying how tiresome it is. They are so tired of this. Have to do this sacrifice thing every day, every week! Have to go to the temple all the time! So tired!

And the thing that made God so angry about it, is that it made the other nations look at Him and say, what kind of God is this? Other nations look at Israel and say what kind of a God would let His own people treat Him that way? Several times the Lord refers to the nations. He says that over and over again. The reason He does this is because at this time, in the ancient East, there were religions everywhere. You saw them on every corner. Pretty much every nation had their own kind of key god or key figure whom they worshiped. And they made all kinds of offerings and sacrifices. Some of them brought food. Some of them brought animals to their gods. Some brought human sacrifices, child sacrifices, because the idea was, the greater the sacrifice, the greater the god.

Which means that when the other nations saw Israel worshipping this way, they would have said, "what a weak and pathetic God; what a joke! Just look at what they are giving Him. Just look at what they are doing." God saw that, and He hated it. He couldn't stand it.

In fact, there were some foreigners around even within the nation of Israel at the time, because when the Babylonians took them off into exile, they put other peoples in the land, created the race of the Samaritans. There were Jews and Gentiles in this area, and the Gentiles would have seen the Jews coming back into the land doing this. And they would have said, I don't care about that God. I don't care about that Deity. What's the point? They don't even like Him!

That's why the Lord says in verse 11, From the rising of the sun, even to its setting, my name will be great among the nations. That means from one end of the earth to the other, from one end of the globe to the other, My name will be great. They will respect Me, they will give Me honor, Israel, even if you don't.

And there is even more to this story. Because as you study, one thing that jumps out at you as being sarcastic and ironic, is the fact that the problem here is not that Israel was disobedient. The problem in this book and in this chapter is not that they are outwardly sinning and outwardly rebelling. They did what God said. They went to the temple; they made their sacrifices. They did their acts of worship, but the problem was how they did it. They didn't care. The problem was their motivation. They didn't do it for God. They didn't do it for His sake. They're just going through the motions. They are just checking off a box. They are just coming to church singing a few songs, saying a few prayers, putting a few dollars in the offering plate and going home. Week in, week out. God doesn't want that kind of worship. That doesn't make His name great among the nations. It doesn't make His name great among anybody. Nobody wants this. This is pathetic.

Listen, friends. God doesn't care that you come to church or that you come to the temple as much as He cares *why* you come. He doesn't care that you meet, or that you reopen as much as He cares why you do it. What is the heart behind it? What is the motivation? There are churches that are meeting right now and reopening all across the United States and Canada, and God doesn't like it. God's not pleased.

And then there's churches that are reopening in other parts of the world, and God is pleased. The only difference is their motivation. The only difference is what they are doing it for. You need to do it to make His name great. That is what the church is all about. You need to do it to lift Him up and exalt Him and bring Him glory and honor. Or else don't do it at all.

Our goal and all we do as a church is to glorify God and to help other people glorify God. Our goal as a church is to make His name great, and to help others make His name great as they see us, watch us, observe us and say "there's something different there. There is something real and genuine. And I want that, I need that". That is the point of the church. That is the point of God's people. That was even what God wanted Israel to do. That's what He wanted to see here. And they were failing. Let it never be said of us that we are failing at this, making the same mistake.

Charles Spurgeon, in one of his sermons once said this: Never think of the Church of God as if she were in danger. If you do, you will be like Uzzah. You'll put forth your hand in order to steady the Ark and you'll provoke the Lord. Rest assured that if the church was in danger, you could not deliver it. If the church was in trouble, your feeble strength could do nothing. Because if Christ can't take care of His church, then what good are you? If Christ can't watch over it, then what can you do? Be still and know that He is God. This is His church, and it is His people. And He will take care of it and He will do it all for His own glory.

Leads me to ask the question this morning friends, do you believe that? Do you believe that this is all for the glory of God? Do you believe that the church will be okay? It will be all right because God will take care of it. He will watch over it for His glory. As you watch all the stuff on the news, as you see all the stuff going on with the government and the pandemic and the lockdowns, does it make you nervous? Does it make you anxious and afraid because you are afraid it is going to damage the church? Destroy it?

Listen, friends, I asked you that because you need to remember what the Bible says here. You need to remember what the book of Malachi says. God will take care of His people. The Book of Malachi says that

God will take care of His temple, His church. It was that way in the Old Testament. It is that way in the New. If He loves you, He'll take care of you. You don't have to worry. You don't have to be afraid for His church. God has you covered.

To ask this another way, why do you come to church? We've been talking about that a lot this morning. Why do you come to a place of worship? What is your motivation in that? What is your heart behind it? Do you come to church because you are angry? Do you want to go to church because you are upset about something, anxious, afraid? You want to make a stand and stick it to the government and prove a point?

Or do you want to come for something else? Do you want to come to bring glory to God and make His name great among the nations? Do you want to come so other people will look at you and say "I want that? I want what they have".

You need to remember what the Bible in the book of Malachi says about this as well. This is why you need to come to church. This is what it is all about. This is your number one priority as a Christian. You need to come for His honour above all else. It's not true worship if you don't do that.

So, will you do that today? Will you come to church to bring Him glory? You know, this is actually a really good time to bring up this subject because we can't come to our church right now. We can't hold services due to the corona virus. So, will you take advantage of this time? Will you take advantage of this break from going to services to examine your heart so that when you come back, you come for the right reasons? When you come back, you come with the proper motivation? That is what God would want you to do. He would want you to make this time count for that.

In my studies this week, I came across a story of the time a young man was asking a drunk friend of his at a bar, "Are you a Christian?" And the drunk man replied right away. Said, "Yes, I'm a Christian. I go to church every Sunday, never missed a service." To which the young man thought about, and he said, "You know, I guess it won't do me any good either. Might as well stay here and drink."

My friends, there's a lesson in that story. And that is the church won't do you any good if you don't come for the right reasons. If you don't come for the glory of God. Will you do that today? Will you make it a priority in your life?

Let me pray that you would. "Father, we pray for your help in this. As I studied this passage this week, and just started thinking about this whole issue of church and worship and the motive behind it, my heart was broken over what we often see among us. God, half-hearted worship and half-hearted sacrifices and half-hearted singing and prayer and living is just so common here. See it everywhere. In fact, it's so common, Lord, that we're used to it. Doesn't even bother us anymore. The hypocrisy and the fakeness and the artificiality. It's a way of life. I pray it would never be so among us anymore.

We do long to be a church again. We do miss one another. But with that sorrow and with that grief, comes a whole mix of emotions and motivations, the good and the bad. Lord, would you purify our hearts, that the church would never be anything to us, but for Your glory. And for Your name.

Father, these things are bigger than us. The church is bigger than us. Your Worship is bigger than us. It is bigger than these problems that we are facing right now. It is bigger than all the issues that we have in this world right now, after this crazy year of 2020. Your work goes on, and it will go on. It'll go on in 2021, it will

go on in 2022, and it will go on in 2023. It will never stop. Because you are a God who is greater than all these things. And we need to approach You that way, in our worship.

Would you help us to do that, Lord? As we go throughout this week, Father, would we be living sacrifices. We need to give You our very best. Provoke our hearts to do that, Lord. Draw us near to You. Pray this in Christ's name and for His glory. Amen.