

A Covenant of Love

Malachi 2:10-16

The God of Israel says that he hateth putting away, that he hates divorce. That's what verse 16 clearly says, and I think we can all agree with God on that point. No one who has lived through it can doubt the terrible pain it causes.

And part of the reason that it is painful is that it is so violent. It tears apart two that had been made into one. It leaves a gaping wound.

Moreover, this violence cannot be hidden. After all, it's not just superstars like Tom Brady and Gisele Bündchen whose dirty laundry is aired in public. Everyone knows what has happened when you suddenly don't wear that wedding ring anymore. The violence is not secret, but covers the garments where everyone can see it. And so along with the pain goes the shame, the shame of having failed another, the shame of having messed up your own life and your kids' lives.

But God also hates divorce because it invariably involves betrayal. Notice that Malachi keeps repeating the word treachery. For the fact is that, in one way or another, divorce always involves betrayal, going back on the vows spouses make to each other, to love and to cherish as long as they both shall live.

"But wait a minute, preacher. You can't necessarily say that. What if my husband walked out on me? What if my wife cheated on me? I haven't failed. It's his sin. It's her fault."

Now, it's easy for anyone to shift the blame for a failed marriage. In fact, playing pin the blame for the divorce is one of our favorite parlor games. Of course it's that rat's fault. How could he be unfaithful to me? How could she just leave and take my children with her?

Of course, in the Christian community, we play this game in a slightly different way: we play pin the blame on the culture. And it is hard to deny that, after fifty years of experimentation with the so-called "sexual revolution," American culture has drifted first into the Romantic notion that feelings are all that matter, to today's insistence that your attractions determine your identity. No wonder marriages don't stay together any longer – the very idea of marriage has been turned on its head.

Well, there's a lot of truth in such assessments of blame. After all, it's highly unlikely that either spouse shoulders all the responsibility for any broken relationship. And it's certainly the case that our broader culture is not helping much where it comes to promoting or preserving the institution of marriage. No, since the advent of "no-fault" divorce in the 1960's, marriages don't last as long, and fewer people are even bothering to tie the knot at all: since 1982, the number of Americans getting married every year has dropped from 10.6 per thousand people to just 6.5. The sad fact is that only 1/3 of all adult men younger than me have ever been married at all. It's hard to start a family when you don't even know what one is supposed to look like.

But the strange thing is that Malachi doesn't play pin the blame for the divorce, either on the parties to the marriage or on the broader culture as a whole. Instead, he links the collapse of the family to something that at first glance seems to be completely unrelated: the problem of worship.

For verse 10 explains that we not only deal treacherously with each other when we steal each other's husbands and wives. No, we also profane the covenant of our fathers. In other words, our lack of faithfulness to our spouses is somehow connected to the lack of faithfulness to our God. It is because we break God's covenant that we go on to break our marriage covenants.

Is that really true? Well, it certainly was in Malachi's time. After all, God had forbidden His people to marry outside of their faith, but verse 11 points out that they kept on marrying people who worshipped and served other gods anyway. In so doing, it was inevitable that their own hearts would be led astray.

But this problem wasn't limited to Malachi's generation. No, some 600 years earlier, King Solomon had done the very same thing: I Kings 11 tells us that "his wives turned away his heart after other gods: and his heart

was not perfect with the Lord his God, as was the heart of David his father. For Solomon went after Ashtoreth the goddess of the Zidonians, and after Milcom the abomination of the Ammonites.”

Now, we could invite Solomon to play the blame game along with us. After all, He could have pointed to the cultural expectation for kings to make marriage alliances with foreign countries as a way of insuring the peace. And he could have made excuses for his growing faithlessness by pointing to his wife, or in his case his wives. It was all their fault. It was they who turned his heart away from God. How wicked they were.

There’s only one problem with such a seemingly rational conclusion: God simply doesn’t agree. No, in verse 11, God pins the blame squarely on Judah, on the people of God, and not on their foreign wives. God says it is Judah that has dealt treacherously. It is Judah that has profaned the holiness of the Lord. In short, the breakdown of the family is Judah’s fault.

But why were they to blame? Because the choices that the men of Judah made revealed their true priorities. For the fact is that they did not put God first when they picked out whom they were to marry. And so they ended up being treacherous to their God, breaking His covenant.

Could it be that we have the same problem? Could it be that the reason Christian marriages fail so often is because we Christians are marrying for the wrong reason? Could the problem simply be that we are not putting God first when we are dating?

Well, why are people attracted to one another? Why do people get married today?

Some people marry for looks. But no matter how much plastic surgery she endures and no matter how many repetitions he does in the weight room, looks fade over the years. Scripture, of course, says it best in Proverbs 31:30: favor is deceitful and beauty is vain. Charm tricks us, and beauty is fleeting. If we marry for looks, why should we be surprised if we divorce because our looks and our spouse’s looks have changed?

Other people marry for lust. They are carried along on a wave of biochemistry from the first date all the way to the altar. But some time within the first seven years of marriage, on average, the chemistry fails – and that, in turn, leads to the legendary “seven-year itch,” as spouses all too often begin to explore what they think are greener pastures. But if we have confuse chemistry with love, why should we be surprised if we divorce because our feelings have changed?

“Oh, but preacher, we know better than all that. We are not so immature. We know that people who marry for looks or lust are really just making an idol out of their spouse, in much the same way that the ancients worshipped Aphrodite or Venus. We are not so foolish.”

Perhaps not. But if we have not succumbed to the charms of Venus, we are truly going against the grain of the culture, which has uncritically embraced the Romantic idea that love is simply chemistry and that looks are all that is important. No, it’s not too much of a stretch to say that much of the mass media is just as much a worship experience for the modern devotees of Venus as a televised Billy Graham crusade would be a worship experience for us.

But even if we are not so shallow, we are not off the hook quite yet. For what are the characteristics that mature, devoted Christians should seek in a marriage partner?

Let’s be really Biblical and quote our responsive reading from Genesis 2, saying that we want a “help meet,” a helper suited to us. We want someone to strengthen us and help us live our lives. We want someone to complete us and comfort us. What could be wrong with any of that?

Or maybe we marry because we want to have children. After all, didn’t God tell Adam and Eve in Genesis chapter 1 to multiply and replenish the earth? And doesn’t Psalm 127 say that children are a heritage of the Lord, and that the fruit of the womb is his reward? Surely it’s not wrong to get married because you want a family.

Or what if you seek a marriage partner simply because you are lonely and want to be loved? After all, we read from Genesis chapter 2 that as far back as the Garden of Eden, even before there was any sin in the world,

God said it wasn't good for a man to be alone. And after all, God is love, and love always involves relationships. So, what's wrong with wanting to be loved?

Nothing at all. There's nothing wrong with having a suitable helper and a companion. There's nothing wrong with children, and there's nothing wrong with love. But if we get married for any of these reasons, then we have, however unintentionally, fallen into the sin of Judah. We have, in fact, profaned the covenant of our fathers.

Why is that? Because comfort and companionship, love and children are supposed to be the byproducts of the marriage relationship, not the reason for it. You are supposed to get all these wonderful things because you have chosen to give yourself away to another, making an unconditional, self-sacrificial, life-long commitment to someone else.

In other words, in the sort of marriage that God intended, your attention and focus are supposed to be on your spouse: his needs, her wants, what makes him happy, what makes her feel special. If you get married because you want something, then your focus is still on you, no matter how good any of the things may be that you want for yourself. And if your focus is on what you can get out of a marriage, you are by definition not loving your spouse. You are breaking your covenant vows. You are being unfaithful, whether the marriage ends in legal divorce or not.

What, for example, would you think of a man who actually articulated the idea of marriage in such a way? Imagine this sort of proposal: "Look, what I want is regular intimacy, meals on the table every night, some healthy children, and I want to feel important and needed. I'm willing to pay you some pretty rings, a nice house and a car, and a few vacations a year. Whaddya say?"

The only difference between such a man and the one who visits the red light district is the price he is willing to offer. For the fact is that such a self-centered man is not really making covenant promises to his wife. Instead, he's treating her like a prostitute.

That's why Malachi links marital infidelity to bringing the wrong kind of offerings to God. That's why being unfaithful to our spouse is so similar to worshipping pagan idols.

For the ancient pagans bargained with their false gods in much the same way that a man makes an agreement with a prostitute. They seek to enter a mutually beneficial contract: "Well, I have brought the prescribed offering of a ram. So, Zeus or Venus or whatever your name is, you owe me more sheep and healthier sheep. I paid you off, now give me what I deserve."

But, believe it or not, marriage is no more contractual than worship is. For there's no "if/then" language in a wedding, is there? No, the husband and wife say to each other, "I take you, regardless of whether we are rich or poor, sick or healthy. And with this ring I give myself to you – all that I am and all that I have." Each makes an unconditional promise to the other – a promise each swears not to break as long as they both shall live, regardless of what the circumstances of their lives might be, and regardless of what the other might do or not do in return.

And that's exactly the same kind of covenant God makes with us. For God knew that we fallen human beings would never be able to earn our salvation. In fact, He knew there was nothing we could offer Him that He had not already made. So, God made a covenant with Abraham, not a contract. God promised to give Abraham a place to live and numerous descendants, not because Abraham deserved it, but just because God wanted to.

Moreover, God promised that if His covenant were to be broken, God Himself would die. And God kept that covenant promise on the cross of Christ, giving fallen humanity not what we deserve and not even what we bargained for, but what we truly need: the unconditional, self-sacrificial, gracious, forgiving love of a Bridegroom for His bride. And Jesus calls us to follow His example – especially where it comes to those who we claim are the closest to our hearts.

So, how can we possibly love our husbands and wives in such a selfless way? Well, how did God begin the book of Malachi? The same way that He begins the life of every new Christian, every person He has given the gift of new life: "I have loved you. I have loved you with an everlasting love. I have given my dear Son for you. Look at

the cross and remember my love, poured out on the unlovely and the rebellious, on the hateful and the undeserving.” So, let us embrace God’s unconditional, self-sacrificial love even for self-centered sinners like us. For only then will we be able to love Him and others in the same way.