

Giving Our Best
Malachi 1:6-14

This is one of those passages that, at first glance, makes us wonder why we study the Old Testament. I mean, so what if those ancient priests were offering animals that were blind or lame or sick or in some other way didn't quite measure up to all the detailed requirements in the Book of Leviticus? How in the world could any of this possibly apply to modern-day Christians?

Well, let's think back to what Peter told us in our responsive reading this morning: all those who trust in Christ are not only living stones, making up the true Temple of God. No, we are also a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. We are supposed to offer up spiritual sacrifices to God. So, that means Malachi's comments don't just apply to the ancient priests who worked in the Temple in Jerusalem. And they aren't just limited to modern preachers or ruling elders. No, since all Christians are called to be priests, since all Christians are called to offer sacrifices, Malachi is talking to all of us.

But it's not like we burn the carcasses of bulls or sheep or goats as part of our worship services anymore. After all, we know that, on the cross, Jesus offered Himself up once for all the sins of His people. Moreover, we know that all those Old Testament animal sacrifices were just shadows, signposts pointing to the one, great, all-sufficient sacrifice of Jesus.

So much is true. But if all the outward and physical signs of the Old Testament ceremonial law have been fulfilled in Christ, if it's true that all those Old Testament shadows have been replaced by a higher spiritual reality, what does that say about the sacrifices that we New Testament priests owe to our God? Could it be that Jesus has raised the bar concerning what offerings we are to make? Could it be that Malachi has something to say to us after all?

For example, let's take a look at verse 11. Here, God says that one reason He wants his offerings to be pure is that He wants His name to be great among the Gentiles, among all the nations, even those who don't know Him or profess faith in Him. Such witness, such evangelism and missions are thus a big part of the spiritual sacrifice that Peter says that all of God's people are called to make.

So, how are we doing with that part of our offering? How often do we give Jesus credit for the great things that happen in our lives? After all, we find it easy to praise our team's quarterback for an accurate pass or a wide receiver for an outstanding catch. But how easy is it for us to praise the Lord when He answers our prayers, or even when He surprises us with an unexpected blessing?

Or when our friends or loved ones tell us about their problems, how often do we point them to Jesus as the only One Who can solve the brokenness in their lives? Over the summer, we learned about the Three Circles evangelism tool, a simple way that the EPC recommends be used to explain the gospel to anyone who needs to know Christ or to know Him better. But how many of us have taken the opportunity to use that tool over the last few weeks? How many of us have even been praying for such opportunities to present themselves?

Ah, but there's another way we can offer an impure sacrifice to the Lord. For in chapter one of the Book of Leviticus, we find these words:

"If his offering *is* a burnt sacrifice of the herd, let him offer a male without blemish; he shall offer it of his own free will at the door of the tabernacle of meeting before the LORD. Then he shall put his hand on the head of the burnt offering, and it will be accepted on his behalf to make atonement for him. He shall kill the bull before the LORD; and the priests, Aaron's sons, shall bring the blood and sprinkle the blood all around on the altar that *is by* the door of the tabernacle of meeting."

Of course, we New Testament believers realize how all of this points to Christ. He is the male without blemish. He is the One whose blood was shed to make atonement, to pay for the sins of His people. But did you notice that when an Old Testament worshipper brought an offering, he would place his hand on the head of the animal? In doing so, he was identifying with it, saying that it would die in his place.

Just so, when we come to Christ by faith, we become identified with Him. As Peter says, if we are living stones that make up His Temple, that means that the Spirit of Christ doesn't just live among us, but within us. So it's no wonder that we are called to be a holy nation. Our very lives are called to reflect His character, to demonstrate His truth and justice, His purity and holiness, His mercy and love. This is the spiritual sacrifice we are called to offer.

So, how are we doing with that part of our offering? Or, to put in Malachi's terms, are we bringing pure sacrifices into His Temple?

For remember, when those Old Testament priests were offering sacrifices, although they didn't know it, they were making statements about Jesus. When they offered imperfect animals, they were saying that Jesus would be imperfect. When they offered the lame and the sick, they were saying that Jesus would be helpless and weak. When they offered less than their best, they were saying that Jesus just isn't worth much. And the people who brought those kinds of offerings to the Old Testament Temple were actually saying the same things.

So, what does the spiritual sacrifice of our lives say about Jesus? How does the way we live each and every day express what we really think of Him?

"Jesus? Why, He doesn't care that I only think about Him whenever I want something or whenever I'm in trouble. He's a lot like Santa Claus – I only need to love him enough to stay off of His "naughty list" so that I can get what I want.

"Jesus? Oh, I find lots of things and activities much more interesting than He is. In fact, I only come to worship because it's my duty. I only pay attention to Him because I want to avoid the pains of Hell, not because I want to be with Him forever.

"Jesus? Oh, I treat Him like a corrupt politician. I don't think He cares if I go on breaking His laws, as long as I pray every now and then, or drop a few coins in the offering plate. The really sad thing is that He can be bought off at such a cheap price.

"Jesus? Oh, He's really nothing more than a beggar. He settles for any time or attention, for any old thing that I want to give Him.

"Jesus? He's a lot like a dog – He's happy with the crumbs leftover from my table."

When we offer up only part of ourselves to Jesus, aren't we really saying those the sorts of things about Him? Isn't that what we really think about Jesus when we are more interested in the gifts than the Giver, when we care more about the creation than the Creator? Isn't that what we are really saying about Jesus when we just go through the motions of worship or Bible study or prayer? Isn't that what we are really saying about Jesus when, instead of loving Him with all that we are and all that we have, we just play church?

So what's so bad about playing church? What's so bad about claiming the name of Christ and then living our lives the way we want to? What's so bad about offering only a part of ourselves to Him and holding the rest back?

Well, when we do that, we're doing the same sort of thing that those Old Testament priests did, the same thing which earned Malachi's condemnation. For when we only offer part of ourselves to God, when we live as halfway Christians, we despise God's name and rob Him of His glory. And instead of drawing the nations to Him by living out His truth and justice, His purity and holiness, His mercy and love, we drive them away with our self-centered hypocrisy.

So, what does Malachi's message mean for us New Testament believers? Frankly, that it would be better for us to shut the doors of the Sanctuary than to play church, worshipping God halfway. It would be better for all of us to stay at home than to despise God, offering Him less than our best. For the Lord is not a Santa Claus or a politician or a beggar or a dog. He is a Great King, the King of Glory. He reigns over all the earth, and His name is dreadful among the heathen.

So who can doubt that we owe God at least as much as His Old Testament people did? Since we know that God gave Jesus Christ to die in our place, since we know that God gave His best for us, doesn't God deserve our best, too?

Think about it this way. What would your wife think if you gave her a cubic zirconia instead of a diamond? No, it probably wouldn't help to explain to her that the appearance of the two are almost the same. It wouldn't help to explain that the cubic zirconia actually has a smaller carbon footprint than a diamond. You're still sleeping on the couch.

For why do we give diamonds to the ones we love? Simply because they are costly. When we give diamonds, we are saying, "This is how much I think of you. I'm giving you the best I can because this is how much I think you are worth."

Or imagine asking a girl for a date like this: "Well, I know it's the last minute, but I don't have anything better to do tonight, and I don't want to spend a lot of money on a fancy dinner for you. So why don't we go over to your place so you can cook something for me?" The only question would be how hard she was going to slap you.

Beloved of God, we have been ransomed by the blood of Christ. God has lavished His love upon us. God has given us His best. But have we been giving God our best? Or has He had to settle for leftovers and afterthoughts? Does God come first in our lives, or is He somewhere down the list?

Does God come first when we sit down to pay our monthly bills? Do we give God what's left over after all our other expenses, and after all the things we want, or do we budget our other expenses around God's tithe?

When we decide how to spend that all-too-small amount of free time that we might have, does God come first? Which is more often in our hand, the Bible or the remote control? What part of our pants are going to wear out first, the seat or the knees?

Malachi said that the Old Testament people of God found worship to be a weariness. Is that true for us? Is prayer a daily chore or a daily joy? Do we look forward to public worship all week, or do we find any old excuse sufficient to stay home?

As Malachi points out in verse 6, a son honors his father, and longs to spend time with him. A servant gives fear and reverence to his master. Those things go without saying.

Well, we call God our Father. We call Jesus our Lord and master. As a kingdom of priests, we owe the Lord our best, the first portion of our time, our talents, and our treasure. As a holy nation, we owe our love and our reverence, we owe all that we are and all that we have to our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer. That's the sort of spiritual sacrifice we are all called to bring to the Lord. So, have we given God His due? Have we given God our best? Will we?