

EXTRAVAGANT WASTE AND THE HONOR OF GOD

When I was in high school, the first Saturday night of every month was special. Youth For Christ held a rally for teens at the Mel Trotter Auditorium in Grand Rapids. They brought in the latest Christian movies, great speakers, comedians, and musicians.

Every first Saturday our youth group from Sparta Baptist loaded up the bus and made the trek to the big city. We sang gospel choruses down and back. It was not to be missed.

I remember one Saturday night sitting in the back of the auditorium with cousins Dave and Kenny. They took an offering at YFC in those days and my cousin Dave took out a ten dollar bill to put in the offering. That's back when we made fifty cents per hour working for Dave's dad at the Farm Supply Store. Ten Dollars represented half a week's work.

Kenny's eyes went wide when he saw the ten dollar bill and he tried to talk Dave out of giving—Kenny was in his post-missionary-kid rebellious stage at that time. He thought dropping ten bucks in the offering was a ridiculous waste. Dave remained steadfast. Finally Kenny told Dave, "If you're going to give it away, why not give it to me? I can use it more than they can."

Dave ignored him and put the money in the offering.

That little snapshot from life has always stuck with me. It's become a metaphor of sorts for two attitudes that compete for my own approach to God. Dave wanted to honor God. Kenny thought honoring God was a waste of time and money. Dave was engaged with what was going on at the rally. Kenny entertained himself with snide remarks and barely concealed contempt for the rally. I saw both inner dispositions played out with stunning clarity and knew that one or the other would characterize me. There was precious little middle ground between them.

Turn with me to Malachi 1:6-14. The Prophet Malachi is writing to Israelites only one or two generations since the repatriation from the Babylonian exile. They have endured the contemptuous opposition of locals as they rebuilt the temple, restored worship and reconstructed the city walls. The recovery has been more challenging than they thought and expectations of glory have been ground to dust in the reality of replanting the nation back in the land.

Malachi is writing to a weary, disaffected people whose spiritual indifference showed up in their approach to worship. Devotion had devolved into duty. The people went about their religious lives perfunctorily and God got the leftovers. Let's read what Malachi has to say.

What Malachi begins in these nine verses spills over into the first nine verses of chapter two. It's the longest section in the book. We'll look at what he adds in the second chapter next week.

God's complaint is chiefly with the priests, although it flows down to the people. Priests were the gatekeepers for sacrifice and worship. Their failure to uphold appropriate boundaries precipitated a much broader contempt for God and the things of God.

God begins his dispute with a statement everyone in Israel would have agreed to, and then he follows up with two probing questions and an accusation: "'A son honors his father, and a servant his master. If I am a father, where is the honor due me? If I am a master, where is the respect due me?' says the LORD Almighty. 'It is you, O priests, who show contempt for my name.'"

Honor for parents was deeply ingrained in the Hebrew culture. It was enshrined in the Ten Commandments and enforced in the civil code. In another context, the word honor might be

translated *glory*. To honor someone meant to treat that individual as weighty, a person of substance and worth, someone not to be trifled with. It was expected that children honor their parents.

And of course, servants were expected to honor their masters. Slavery then was different than the brutal bondage practiced in the Americas, but slaves were still expected to treat their masters respectfully.

The word respect captures the sense of what it means to fear God. Those who fear God take God seriously and treat him with appropriate deference and reverence.

The priests would have agreed with this. It was a no-brainer! So God's questions indicting Israel for withholding honor and respect would have had an immediate, forceful impact. And God singles out the priests as having shown contempt for God's name.

The priests, quite naturally, would have protested. "We serve in the temple, leading the people in worship and performing all the rituals you, God, require. How have we shown contempt for your name?"

"You place defiled food on my altar."

God made it clear that Israel could not bring whatever it wanted for sacrifice and call it good. He said plainly: "If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the LORD your God" (Deuteronomy 15:21).

In Leviticus, God spelled out what that meant in redundant detail. In an extended passage, among other things, God warns: "Do not offer to the LORD the blind, the injured or the maimed, or anything with warts or festering or running sores" (Lev. 22:22).

The reason behind these carefully proscribed limits had everything to do with treating God special, with honoring him: "I am YAHWEH. Do not profane my holy name. I must be acknowledged as holy by the Israelites. I am YAHWEH who makes you holy and who brought you out of Egypt to be your God. I am YAHWEH" (Lev. 22:31-33).

It is a somber affirmation on God's part. He demands that his people treat him with honor and respect.

So what was going on in Malachi's time that God reacted to so strongly?

The priests were not saying out loud that they thought temple worship was contemptible. God read their actions as words. He was upset at what they *permitted*. From a human perspective the slippage was natural enough. A neighbor to the priest might have brought an animal that was blind in one eye. He begged an indulgence. It had been a tough year for raising sheep. Wool prices were down and his herd had been decimated by a wasting disease. It wasn't strictly what God allowed, but under the circumstances, God would understand, wouldn't he? After all, doesn't God look at the heart? Besides, it's all going to burn on the altar. What difference does one bad eye make?

How would you respond to your neighbor? You aren't debating this in the safety of a Sunday School class. The man is standing there right in front of you with his one-eyed lamb. Would you overlook the trespass and accept his animal? Or would you risk his anger by rebuking him as the law demanded? After all, priests are human too. What if the man wrote a letter to the editor, or circulated a petition to have you deposed as priest? It could hit the front page of the Jerusalem Cit-Pat!

The priest allowed the infraction.

And having allowed one defect, it was easy to overlook another—and another. The people began to expect the privilege, even to demand it. It was good stewardship, after all. Offering cull animals for sacrifice only strengthened the herd, enlarging God's blessings. A few

even brought in for sacrifice sheep that had been victims of wild animals—a 450 BC version of road kill. And the priests, having already compromised God’s laws, went along with it.

Sometimes people brought animals in as payment for a vow. In times of great difficulty, perhaps a severe illness, a person might say to God, “If you will deliver me and restore me to health, I will sacrifice to you the very best animal I have.”

So they got well, and when it was time to fulfill their promise to God, in retrospect, their vow seemed rash, overheated, definitely over the top. It was probably just the flu after all—nothing serious. So they brought a lesser animal instead.

In all this, the priests lost their sense of God’s awesome, transcendent holiness. Worship—offering God the very best of ourselves for his glory—became a bargain basement event. Tired of haggling, the priests became dutiful. Temple service became routine, boring. They showed up and jumped through the hoops but their hearts were empty.

And God was fed up! He was tired of being dumped on, cheated, and disrespected.

Now, listen again to God’s vehement passion in v. 8-14.

God was so upset he expresses the wish that someone would work up the moral courage to close the temple doors, douse the fires on the altar, and shut the whole stinking enterprise down. Maybe that would shock the nation and their priests into realizing how serious God was about his own honor.

Disaffected worship dishonors God.

Look at verse 11 again: “‘My name will be great among the nations, from the rising to the setting of the sun. In every place incense and pure offerings will be brought to my name, because my name will be great among the nations,’ says the LORD Almighty.”

What do you think God was anticipating in this verse? Some have wrongly concluded that God was sanctioning pagan idolatry, suggesting that whatever sincere worship a pagan offered his idol God accepted as pure worship of himself. Even C. S. Lewis seems to have adopted this idea in the final book of the Narnia series.

Everything God says about and against idolatry argues against that notion.

When Jesus came, he commissioned his followers to take the gospel message to the whole world and make disciples. Now, two-thousand years later, the sun never sets on the church of the living God. Christ-followers around the world and around the clock offer God the sacrifice of praise, the fruit of their lips giving thanks to his name.

And more, instead of just one class of his people being designated priests, Jesus “...has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father...” (Revelation 1:6). We are, as Peter wrote: “...a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9).

God intends that you and I who follow Jesus fulfill his anticipation of a people who honor him world-wide, who make his name great among the nations.

So how are we doing? As we bridge the gap between Malachi and us, might God have anything to say about we might be shortchanging his glory? We live in a culture of disrespect where we feel free to speak and act discourteously and contemptuously to anyone in authority over us. Does that rub off on us in our walk with God?

We don’t have a sacrificial system like Israel, but we do have currencies of time, energy, and money we offer God. We have corporate worship during which we seek to honor God. Is it reasonable to ask whether we bring God the best parts of us to worship, or what’s left of us after a week?

For instance, are we as concerned about being rested for worship as we are being rested for work, or going to school? Do we guard our Saturday evenings like we do our workday evenings? Or is it OK to be barely awake during worship? Do we expect God to accept what our employers and teachers plainly would not?

When we come to offer the sacrifice of praise, we need to bring our 'A' game.

Is it possible that our complaints about being bored by church might say more about what we bring to church than what's going on from the platform. Is it possible that the same attitude God found in Israel shows up in us? "It is contemptible.... What a burden!"

When devotion devolves into duty, worship becomes a burdensome thing and we will find something wrong with everything.

This is a passage worth sitting down with in a quiet moment and letting our hearts marinate in it. It begs us to have a private conversation with God, asking him by his good Spirit to show us our blind spots. To pray something like this: "Father, do you see in me actions or attitudes that betray contempt for your name? What might I be doing that is dishonoring to you, or disrespectful? Am I cheating you by not giving you what is rightfully yours? What can I bring in service to my high King that expresses my loving passion that your name be great in my world?"