

ON KEEPING FAITH—MARRIAGE

One of the great challenges in preaching is something called bridging contexts—reaching across the millennia between the world of the Bible to the world of today. So much feels alien to us: the culture, the world view, the sensibilities held in common, and frequently, what God required. And yet the Bible continues to speak into our world with relevance and power.

The passage we're approaching this morning in our study in Malachi is a case in point. It cuts across deeply cherished, American notions of individuality, privacy, and personal freedom and addresses topics we prefer to keep to ourselves—it's nobody's business but our own.

Turn with me to Malachi 2:10-16. Malachi records prophetic disputes God has with his people. In these verses he challenges them with a breach of covenant. Some have married outside the faith. Others have divorced their wives without cause. The marriages and the divorces are treated separately, even though they may well be connected. They often are. Men may have sought divorces from their old wives in order to take new wives—trophy wives. Listen to what God says.

He begins by describing a situation in which Jewish men have married “the daughter of a foreign god.” That phrase describes a woman who worships and serves the idols of the surrounding nations. She neither acknowledges Yahweh nor wants to. She brings her idolatry into the marriage and into the covenant community of Israel.

God uses vivid, powerful language to describe this. He labels marriage to someone outside Judaism as “profaning the covenant of our fathers,” “breaking faith with one another,” “something detestable,” “a desecration of the sanctuary.”

It's a bit over the top for us. We are shaped powerfully by our American culture. We cherish a strong sense of individual rights and freedoms. We believe that what we do in our personal life is our own business. It effects no one but ourselves. So how could who one marries constitute a detestable breach of faith?

God is speaking to his own people, Israel, who are connected to him by virtue of their covenant with him. Notice how God sets the context for the dispute in verse one: “Have we not all one Father? Did not one God create us?” These words echo what God had already said earlier in Malachi about being a Father to Israel. They also echo a question Moses asked centuries ago: “Is [God] not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you” (Deuteronomy 32:6)?

God describes Israel uniquely as his family. They exist because of him and were bound to him and to each other by their covenant with the one true God. Israel is a theocracy—a nation ruled by Yahweh himself. Spiritually speaking, all the Israelites were siblings in God's family.

As part of God's covenant with them, God strictly proscribed marrying anyone from the surrounding nations: “Do not intermarry with them. Do not give your daughters to their sons or take their daughters for your sons, for they will turn your sons away from following me to serve other gods, and the LORD's anger will burn against you and will quickly destroy you” (Deuteronomy 7:3-4).

The great danger was that by marrying outside the faith, compromises would be made to make the marriage work. Idolatry would gain a foothold in the home and spread into the communities. Those fears materialized time and again. Israel slipped into idolatry by intermarrying with the pagan nations around them.

Israel had recently been severely disciplined for their persistent idolatry. They were now back in the land. They had been repatriated from captivity. But the slide into compromise and idolatry was starting all over again. The consequences of unfaithfulness had been devastating for Israel. By marrying outside the faith, men were once again putting the whole nation at risk.

That's why God used such forceful language. Both Ezra and Nehemiah, contemporaries of Malachi, reacted vigorously to the issue. For instance, turn over to Nehemiah 13:23-27. Notice how Nehemiah refers to this as covenant unfaithfulness.

Malachi calls marrying the daughter of a foreign God a breach of faith with the entire Jewish community. Their marriage was not just a personal, private affair. Who they married made an impact on all of God's people. Bringing an idol-worshiper into the covenant community of Israel desecrated that community, the sanctuary the LORD loves.

So how does this speak to us today? We're not under the law, nor do we live in a theocracy. But does God care about who Christians marry? Listen to what Paul wrote the Corinthians: "Do not be yoked together with unbelievers. For what do righteousness and wickedness have in common? Or what fellowship can light have with darkness? What harmony is there between Christ and Belial [a name for Satan]? What does a believer have in common with an unbeliever? What agreement is there between the temple of God and idols? For we are the temple of the living God. As God has said: 'I will live with them and walk among them, and I will be their God, and they will be my people'" (2 Corinthians 6:14-16).

When a Christ-follower marries someone who does not follow Jesus, it's not just a personal decision that only affects themselves. It touches the whole church, the entire covenant community of faith. We are a temple of the living God, the sanctuary the LORD loves. It matters that we marry someone who shares our faith in Jesus. It matters for our own walk with God, for the children we will bring into that marriage, and for the family of God where we connect for worship.

Closely connected to the marriage issue was a matter of divorce—v. 13-16. These verses are among the most difficult in the Bible to translate. Verses fifteen and sixteen are especially tough. But they are even more difficult to bring into our contemporary culture. For instance, in verse sixteen, my translation puts into God's mouth the words: "I hate divorce." That has been used, often wrongly, to define God's attitude toward all divorces and even divorced people. We need to do some careful thinking about what is going on and God's response to it.

Clearly God is in a dispute with his people. Israel had discerned God's inattention to their prayers and his dismissal of their sacrifices. They even wept before the LORD, lamenting his felt absence.

In this case, God backed away because he was "acting as the witness between you and the wife of your youth." It's a curious phrase. What it means is that when the couple exchanged their vows, they invoked God as witness to and guarantor of the promises made. God takes that role seriously.

When we perform a wedding we announce that the couple is standing before God, family and friends who act as witnesses to their vows. We say, "I require and charge you both, as you stand in the presence of God, before whom all the secrets of the heart are disclosed, that having carefully considered the holy covenant you are about to make, you do now declare before this company [God and witnesses] your pledge of faith each to the other."

God was reacting to broken vows, broken promises. Men were divorcing their wives without cause.

The Bible recognizes that because of stubborn, sinful hearts, some marriages are broken beyond repair. Immorality intrudes and a partner hardens his or her heart against their mate. They would rather have the object of their lust than the covenant partner of their marriage. The OT law recognized a situation in which one partner might become obstinate, persistently refusing to provide the basic necessities of a marriage: food, clothing or love. There was abandonment and abuse. Divorce was permitted in such cases.

But the divorces God addresses here were of another sort altogether. We need to look at verse sixteen again. Some scholars suggest a different translation of verse sixteen that has much to commend it. For instance, David Instone-Brewer in his study: *Divorce and Remarriage in the Bible: The Social and Literary Context*, suggests the following: “‘If one hates and divorces [merely on the grounds of aversion],’ says Yahweh, God of Israel, ‘he covers his garment with violence,’ says Yahweh of hosts.”

In other words, Malachi describes a situation where the husband has fallen out of love with his wife. He can’t stand to be around her. So he puts her away to get her out of his life.

Whoever does that, God says, “covers his garment with violence.” The violence is perpetrated against the rejected partner. He or she feels it in their soul. It is an emotional rendering of the heart that creates a grief that is worse than death.

Some of you here have experienced that.

God’s intent in marriage, as we understand from verse sixteen, was to create in marriage a bonded pair, a couple united by strong commitments, sacrificial love, and mutual respect. This would be the necessary context within which children could be born and thrive spiritually.

Studies have consistently shown that divorce is hardest on kids. Part of the impetus that has fueled *Marriage Matters Jackson* is the statistical evidence demonstrating the damage done to children of divorce. Concerned social workers figured out that the best way to help kids was to rescue marriages.

Children of divorce are children at risk. They may become anxious, angry, empty and self-deprecating. Divorce diminishes a child’s capacity to reach his or her full potential. They are economically deprived and emotionally stunted. They become vulnerable to substance abuse and frequently pursue sexual relationships to cover up their loneliness.

No wonder God took Israel to task for their practice of casual divorce. It puts kids at risk and does violence to the abandoned spouse.

So God has a word of counsel to his people. It’s so significant that he says it twice. “...guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith with the wife of your youth.”

You see, no one ever gets up in the morning and out of the blue decides to get a divorce. Arriving at a place in your marriage where you hate your partner is a long, gradual journey. It comes as you accumulate baggage: issues that are never resolved, hurts that are allowed to fester, habits of selfishness and unkindness that go unchecked.

Somewhere along the way I picked up an anonymous piece called *The Wall*. It ends with these lines: “Slowly the wall between them rose, cemented by the mortar of indifference. One day, reaching out to touch each other, they found a barrier they could not penetrate, and recoiling from the coldness of the stone, each retreated from the stranger on the other side. For when love dies, it is not in a moment of angry battle, nor when fiery bodies lose their heat. It lies panting, exhausted, expiring at the bottom of a wall it could not scale.”

Guard yourself in your spirit. Successful, lasting marriages take hard work. It matters first of all who we marry, and it matter that when we marry, we stand guard over our inner selves: to

choose commitment; to choose love.

Any marriage can be at risk at any given time. Marriage has been described as a lifelong process in which two basically incompatible people work out their incompatibilities. There's a bunch of truth in that. In our natural state, we are deeply committed to ourselves and what we want. When selfishness marries selfishness, not-good things can happen.

By God's grace, we have been rescued from our internal commitment to pleasing ourselves. God has introduced us to a kind of love that is sacrificially other-centered. He invites us to bring that kind of love to our marriages.

So guard yourself in your spirit.

The challenge to which these words invite us is to take a deep, inside look. What resentments or bitterness might we be harboring against our mates? What bricks might we be mortaring into a wall that threatens to separate us? What lusts might be enticing us to step outside the holy vows we made, vows to keep ourselves only unto her, for as long as we both live?

Guard yourself in your spirit. Protect your marriage from the inside out. Keep short accounts with yourself and your mate and talk to God about everything that goes on in the landscape of your heart.

Do it, because we claim to be God's people in this world and the world deserves to see a difference.

Do it because God holds us accountable for the personal and emotional violence we heap on our marriage partners when we abandon them.

Do it because your kids matter to God. He desires godly offspring, and divorce put kids at risk for all sorts of damage.

Guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.