

Roy's sermons on the book of Malachi.

Part 3 Malachi 1:10-14 It's About All The Heart; And Useless Fires!

Last time we saw that God said in verse 6 "A son honours his father and a servant his master" and I said that God takes it as a given that is how it should be although it is certainly not that way in our society today. Things have become so derailed and confused in our society: the children seem to be the ones who are governing our world. Parents want to be their children's best friend, and while this is in some ways admirable, they need to be their mother and father, because that is how it was meant to be!

God again uses the example of the priests because those who should have been the guiding lights were the worst offenders of them all. "It is you O priests who show contempt for My Name; you place defiled food on My altar." I pointed out that the heart and soul of the giver was reflected in that which they gave. And for the priest it was reflected in what they accepted from the hands of the giver. Remember, those prescriptions by God for sin were very specific. The animal had to be pure, meaning without disease or defect and all of one colour with regard to sin. This is significant because symbolically, all of those sin sacrifices pointed to Jesus, that spotless sinless Lamb of God, and what He would go on to do upon that cross!

Remember, those animal sacrifices could not do away with anyone's sin: only Jesus could do that. "No one comes to the father except by me" He said. But certainly the heart and the spirit of the sinner was clearly seen in what and how he sought to make payment, (symbolically) for his sin. "When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong? When you sacrificed crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?" Of course the answer to both questions is yes, it is wrong. And yet they were so derelict in their duties to God, that they happily accepted all of those things from the people's hands. "Try offering them to your governor. Would he be pleased with you?" 'How little you do think of Me', God is saying. 'You have no regard for Me at all. You think more of your officials whom I have appointed than you do of Me, the One who has made both them and you from the dust which you were, and shall be again when I take your breath from you.' "Says the Lord Almighty."

This is where we pick up the text this morning Malachi 1:10-14 which I have titled: 'It's All About The Heart; And Useless Fires!! Here we see, it is as though God cries out in anguish v10 "oh that one of you would shut the temple doors." So it is very clear then (as we have seen many times over the years) that outward forms of religiousness or religious practises were never what God desired or was looking for from His people. It is as though He was saying, (and I speak respectfully here Lord) 'I am sick and tired of all of this stuff. These endless empty headed and hearted practises mean nothing to Me, and they are doing you no good!'

Yes how very clear it is that external religiosity is not Christianity. There is a line in a song by a Christian group called Casting Crowns which goes like this "God has got to change your heart before He changes your shirt." Or in other words God must deal with the inside before He deals with the outside. In Zechariah 3:1-4 we read "then he showed me Joshua the high priest standing before the Angel of the Lord, and Satan standing at his right side to accuse him. The Lord said to Satan, the Lord rebuke you, Satan. The Lord, who has chosen Jerusalem, rebuke you. Is not this man a burning stick snatched from the fire? Now Joshua was dressed in filthy clothes as he stood before the Angel. The Angel said to those who were standing before him, "take off his filthy clothes." Then he said to

Joshua, "see, I have taken away your sin, and I will put rich garments on you." Here is a vision of a righteous high priest, Joshua. His name means the Lord saves. This is very similar to that imagery in chapters 1 and 2 of the book of Job, when all the angels are gathered there before the Lord and Satan also comes to accuse the servants of God. I heard a sermon years ago where the preacher explained how Joshua is dressed in "filthy clothes", literally meaning covered in human excrement, with a stench that would have reached to heaven, because he was the High priest. As we have seen before, once a year the High priest, on the day of atonement, would enter into the holy of holies to make a once a year offering to God for the collective sin of the whole nation of Israel. But before he did so, he had to ceremonially wash behind a sheet in full view of the people. When clean, he would then get meticulously dressed in special clothes made for just that occasion, and once he was, only then would he go in and make that offering. And before he did so, there would be a rope tied around his leg just in case the offering was not accepted by God, so they would then be able to drag the body out. And the nation would hold their collective breath, until they saw the smoke rising as the evidence that, yes indeed, God had accepted that offering from the hand of the High priest. That is why it was called holy smoke!

But in Zechariah 3 he is dressed in "filthy clothes". And why? Well, it is symbolic of the stench of the sin of Israel and the priesthood as a whole at that time, in the sight of God. He should have been snuffed out to ever dare to appear in such clothes, in the presence of the King of Kings. But do you see: *God rebuked the accuser*. In effect He is saying 'close your mouth Evil One; speak not against my servant for he is "an ember snatched from the fire."' So snatched from the fires of judgement and hell, and raised up as a burning ember for the fire of the message of the gospel!

So the vision in Zechariah 3 tells us the same thing as does v10 of Malachi 1. We can be filthy on the outside while we may yet be clean on the inside. And likewise, though our clothes be clean, prim and proper; yes, though we look good on the outside the stench of our sin still rises to heaven! We are such a shallow society today aren't we? Now I know that it has always been this way: "there is nothing new under the sun", the Bible says, and yet more and more it does appear to be the case, that the outside is what is important today.

But from the vision of Joshua in Zechariah 3 we can see that is not what is important to God.

1 Samuel 16:7: "for the Lord does not look at the things man looks at; man looks at the outward appearance but the Lord looks at the heart." Look at verse 4 of Zechariah chapter 3: "See I have taken away your sin and I will put rich garments on you." So, as in that song which I mentioned earlier, God always deals with the inside first. As my beautiful mother in law used to say, "Roy, first the spiritual then the physical."

Yes, God does use external means to affect the inside, but His goal is always the soul! "Oh that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not light useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you and I will accept no offering from your hands." So can you see, if our heart is not right, the stuff that we supposedly do in God's name is just stuff, and God doesn't need our stuff, He's got enough stuff of His own. What He is after is a heart which is repentant and sorry for our sin. And also a response in our life which reflects the gratitude of that ember which has been snatched from the fires of hell. Otherwise God "will accept nothing from our hands." Our deeds, our finances: nothing, because it's all a sham, it's all about playing the game of being Christian, playing the game of being men-pleasers. Or perhaps even worse still: being deceived ourselves, because God does not play games!

Beloved, we must not light "useless fires" upon the altar of God. And what is the altar of God? Where is sin truly dealt with and paid for? Well of course it is the cross of Jesus Christ. And in today's

world, in our modern society what are “useless fires” upon the altar which is Christ's cross? May I suggest, that it is trying to have God's Grace and Mercy upon our own terms. Surely that is what Israel was doing in the days of Malachi. The people were bringing their sacrifices, the priests were lighting those sacrificial fires, but it was all to no avail, it was all “useless” because both sinner and priest were not actually dealing with the problem which was at the core of the matter: a broken relationship with God!

Friends, I say these following things with all sensitivity: someone can go to church all of their lives, they can put their money in the bag each week, they can smile and talk and have cups of tea and cake and then go home, but it can all add up to nothing. They can all be “useless fires”. Because if they haven't been confronted with their own sin; yes, if they haven't in their hearts and in their mind's-eye stood at the foot of Christ's cross and looked with horror and gratitude at that Crown of vicious thorns, and gazed upon those nails in His hands and feet, and heard those words for themselves (knowing that they put him there) “Father forgive them for they know not what they do”; then in truth, they know not the Son of God. Nor of any relationship with God through Him!

But beloved all is not lost, because while there is life, there is yet hope.

Brothers and sisters, if such thoughts are troubling you the answer is simple and clear, you need but only come to Him and all will be well. As the old hymn goes “It is well, it is well, it is well, it is well with my soul.”

But friends, no matter what we do, God is showing us the inevitable outcome in verse 11 “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.” Let's remember the context of these words: A thankless, unbelieving, apathetic, people of God in name only! They had contempt for Him, His Name, and His Word. He is saying to them ‘you people think that because you carry My Name on your lips, and also because Abraham was your father in the flesh and you followed Moses through the wilderness, that you own Me, and can treat Me anyway you please, well you are wrong!’

Romans 10:1-4 “Brothers, my heart's desire and prayer to God for the Israelites is that they may be saved. For I can testify about them that they are zealous for God, but their zeal is not based on knowledge. Since they did not know the righteousness that comes from God and sought to establish their own, they did not submit to God's righteousness. Christ is the end of the law so that there may be righteousness for everyone who believes.”

Friends as I said some weeks ago the Jews needed their puny view of God expanded. Malachi chapter 1:5 “you will see it with your own eyes and say great is the Lord even beyond the borders of Israel.” Yes “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.” But what is he talking about? John 3:13-15 “No one has ever gone into heaven except the one who came from heaven the Son of man. Just as Moses lifted up the snake in the desert, so the Son of man must be lifted up, that everyone who believes in him may have eternal life.” And John 6:37-40: “all that the father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away. For I have come down from heaven not to do my will but to do the will of him who sent me. And this is the will of him who sent me, that I shall lose none of all that he has given me, but raise them up at the last day. For my fathers will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise them up at the last day.”

So what is He talking about? He is talking about the true church. Not the church in name only but the church in heart and soul. Romans 2:28-29 "a man is not a Jew if he is only one outwardly, nor is circumcision merely outward and physical. No, a man is a Jew if he is one inwardly; and circumcision is circumcision of the heart, by the spirit, not by the written code. Such a man's praise is not from men, but from God." Again, the Jews believe that they had exclusive ownership and rights to God through their history and ancestry. Well God says no, because His true church for whom Christ died is not found or confined between borders, it is found throughout the whole world! Matthew 28:19: "therefore go and make disciples of all nations." Malachi 1:11 "My name will be great among the nations." And when he speaks of "incense and pure offerings" he simply means heartfelt worship, because that is what those sacrifices and offerings were supposed to be. John 4:23-24 "yes the time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for that is the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is spirit, and his worshippers must worship in spirit and in truth."

God was never looking for lip service from His people; it was always changed hearts and lives. The thief on the cross who was crucified alongside Jesus who railed insults at Him before the Lord's Spirit entered into him and he cried out "Jesus Remember Me when you come into your Kingdom." The poor widow who gave all that she had to live on to God's Work. The tax collector who would not even raise his head to heaven but beat upon his breast and said, "Father forgive me for I am the Sinner." And the man who was possessed by the Legion of demons, who when he was delivered from that evil, begging Jesus "Lord let me go with you." Yes, changed lives, heart religion, that was always the true intention of the law, and indeed all of the word of God!

Look at verse 12 "but you profane it." Profane What? The Name of God. Now we often think of profanity as some kind of swear word, but that is not actually the case when it comes to the name of God. I remember a preacher years ago preaching on the 10 commandments and as he preached on "Thou shalt not take the name of the Lord Thy God in vain." And he pointed out that it is not what we say so much, but more how we live that blasphemes the Name of God. Romans 2:24 "as it is written 'my name is blasphemed among the Gentiles because of you'." So in other words, the way that the people lived, brought blasphemy (meaning condemnation and contempt) down upon the Name of God! To "sniff at the food upon the altar of God" is no different for us today: it is to look with contempt upon the cross of Christ!

Then He again speaks of "injured, crippled and diseased animals" as offerings for sin. So twice in this short chapter of scripture He condemns those things. Brothers and sisters, it is so clear, that it is so very important to God concerning the things which we return and offer up to Him. Because, as I have said, it is a clear indication as to what is going on in our hearts! When it comes to finances does God need my \$10, \$20 or \$100 a week to save His people? Well no. As someone said to me many years ago 'Roy, we can sit on our hands on our verandahs for the rest of our lives, and God will still save His people.' (And the truth is, it is between you and God what you dedicate to Him of your time, your efforts, your deeds and your finances).

But I guess the question is this: do we consider the hope and eternity to which we have been bought, paid for, and saved, a worthy investment in this life? Look at how condemning God's Words are in verse 14: "cursed is the cheat." But what is a cheat? Perhaps a thief, a swindler, a deceiver, or a crook. And notice what He says by way of explanation. It is someone who vows to give such and such, but then holds it back, and yet acts as though he has indeed given that which he had vowed in the first place. So he claims credit for something, perhaps even openly, for an offering which should have been between himself and God. And having done it all so deceitfully!

Beloved, do you ever feel that way? Well I must confess that I often do. I often feel that I am the phoney. The front man, so to speak, of our church, and yet one whose life is not as it should be. My prayer life, my life in the scriptures, my words, my thoughts and my actions: they seem so often to be merely useless fires, upon the altar of God, even Christ's own cross!

But I'm always heartened and humbled by God's patience and mercy with me, and also gladdened by the reality that God doesn't need me to be a hero: He just calls me to be faithful. Yes simple obedience is what He requires, and simple faith and sincere heart and service!

Beloved, these things will never be useless fires upon the altar of God. And they will always be a clear indication of the heart that is for Jesus!

Verse 2 of this chapter "I have loved you" says the Lord."

Bless you all my dearest Beloved in Christ.

Let's Pray!