

Mal 2: Malachi 2:10-17

Today:

Today's passage makes up the first part of Malachi's center. And, you know, it's a passage that might be hard to talk about, much less talk about well, simply because it has the word "divorce" in it. And divorce has touched every one of us, it's personal, it's shaped us or those we love, those we celebrate or grieve for.

So much of what we read in the prophets feels irrelevant, because we're so far removed from Israel's life, but we're not really insulated from divorce. Today's passage makes us feel things, largely because the word "divorce" shows up.

So what we'll do is this: We'll talk about what's going on in Malachi. But first we'll clear the air, and talk about marriage, divorce, remarriage. We've just got to, you know?

And look: In this moment, with this topic, I want to be gentle with us. In a church building particularly, you can't say the word divorce without it bringing up echoes of trauma, memories of embarrassment or being shamed by someone, feelings of guilt or guilty relief.

Let me pray, then we'll go back to that thought. Then we'll talk about what we see in Malachi today.

Prayer:

Divorce: Malachi's Usefulness

Let's start here:

I'm not really going to talk about divorce when it comes to Malachi's passage. And it's not because I'm scared of the topic, or have no deeply personal experience with divorce and what its effects can be, but it's because, when it comes to making sense of Malachi, this passage that was read to us doesn't contribute much to our conversation on divorce.

The New Testament has all sorts of things to say about marriage, divorce, remarriage. And as Christians, of course, we read the Old Testament by way of the New, through New-Testament glasses. I did put a long insert in our bulletins today on marriage, divorce, and remarriage. It's worth looking over sometime, if you want.

Back To Malachi:

But today, when God has Malachi say what he says, God is inviting Judah, and their priests in particular, into a realization of their own hypocrisy.

Assertion/Statement: God's Our Father

This is what we read. I'm going to read from the Common English Bible, rather than the NIV, which was read to us. I'll tell us why in a second, but: Here's how today's passage

begins. And this voice, here, is the Priests' voice. Imagine the priests speaking here:

Isn't there one father for all of us, one God who created us? Why does everyone cheat each other to make the covenant of our ancestors impure?

Most of our translations read something like “why is everyone unfaithful toward each other” but cheating is a valid way to translate this, and great, too. The point is that, “We’re supposed to be on the same team, unified, but we’re cheating each other.” And then priests go on to say, “We’re not just cheating each other, but we’re cheating God.”

11 Judah cheated—a detestable thing was done in Israel and Jerusalem. Judah made the Lord’s holy place impure, which God loved, and married the daughter of a foreign god.

Assertion/Statement: Idolatry is to the Covenant as Cheating on your spouse is to a Marriage:

Cheating, here, is a perfect word. Because it’s a word we use to describe having an affair. And that’s the way the priests are using it here. Judah has been cheating, cheating on God. The priests describe Israel’s behavior as something like a husband bringing home someone other than his spouse, so that he can sleep with that person on his and his wife’s bed.

Assertion/Statement: Actual Marriages Are Leading To Covenant Breaking:

But the reason the priests describes this covenant breaking in marriage terms is because it is the actual marriages that the Israelites are making that are leading to their abandonment of God. The priests don't like this.

And over and over we see the Israelites marrying those who worship other gods, and then being less and less committed to their role as God's People. They give up faithfulness. This is the most significant thing. Their commitment to God erodes. They take up pagan worship. It's just what happens in their world.

Assertion/Statement: Strong Feelings!

And the priests have pretty strong feelings about what should happen to those who marry non-Israelites and engage in idolatry on account of it. Again, reading from the CEB, not the NIV:

12 May the Lord eliminate anyone who does so from the tents of Jacob, anyone awaking, testifying,[c] and making an offering to the Lord of heavenly forces.

Assertion/Statement: Marriage or Idolatry?

The "who does so," is tricky. Are the priests saying that anyone who marries a non-Israelite who worships a pagan gods should be booted out of Israel? Or is Malachi saying

here, speaking for the priests, that anyone who acts like he just described Judah acting--that is, engaging in idolatry--should be booted from Israel?

I do think the priests are calling for divorce, saying that those who marry any foreigner should be punted from Israel.

Frankly, even as Malachi is prophesying, we can read in Ezra about the way he, and later Nehemiah, rail against this very thing, and Ezra makes divorcing foreign women the center of a religious revival.

Two Levels:

So this is all about marriage. On one level, it's about Judah's covenant with God, which is a marriage, the covenant that forms the basis for what marriage in Israel was meant to be like. And it's about the way idolatry, for an Israelite, was like cheating on God. But it's also about those actual marriages that the Israelites had been making while they were in Babylon, were making when they returned to Jerusalem from exile, marriages that were often with women who weren't Israelite, and who did worship pagan gods.

Assertion: Response From God

And God responds to the priests. This is a follow up from the very first verse of Chapter two, which started with a command to the Priests. This is another one. This is the real assertion that God makes, a follow up to this pious talk the priests have been making, this long concern they have about

faithfulness rather than idolatry, the covenant rather than pagan worship:

13 You should do this as well: cover the altar of the Lord with tears, weeping, and groaning because there is still no divine favor for your offering or favorable regard for anything from your hand.

You should go cry on the altar, because--as you know--you're not being blessed for anything you're doing. And let's see this for what it is: A slap in the face, right? A punch to the gut. The priests have just given this long monologue about how terrible Judah has become, but God isn't impressed by their lament. Instead, he focuses on them: It's your hand that isn't getting my regard, it's your offering that's not getting my favor.

And the priests are confused. They ask what amounts to the "objection" in that "Assertion, Objection, Refutation" framework we talked about last week. And it's basic. All Malachi has them saying is "Why?"

Objection/Question: Why?

Why should they go cry on the altar? Why should you repent? And why aren't our offerings being accepted by God?

And, this Objection is Refuted. More precisely, really, this question is answered, but we'll follow the framework I gave

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Refutation/Answer: Because...

So this question is answered. Here's why the priests should treat the altar like a grave, and why nothing they offer God is received by Him:

Because the Lord testifies about you and the wife of your youth against whom you cheated. She is your partner, the wife of your covenant.

Oops. The priests are cheating on their wives.

See, they've been grading sins. They've been really focused on the way the Israelites are marrying non-Israelites, which they see as fundamentally unfaithful to God. Something that will inevitably, they assume, lead to the idolatry God hates so much. But they've rated that, graded that, judged that as worse than their own sin of cheating. Apparently, to be unfaithful to your wife who is an Israelite, is, in the priests eyes, better than being faithful to a wife who isn't an Israelite. So much better that it's not bad at all.

To be unfaithful to your wife who is an Israelite, is, in the priests eyes, better than being faithful to a wife who isn't an Israelite. So much better that it's not bad at all. Cheating on your Israelite wife is okay compared to marrying a non-Israelite.

Refutation/Answer: v15 is about the Priests' Hypocrisy

From here, the Hebrew text gets weird. Whatever your translation might say, the implication is that God has been a part of the marriages of the priests, and these priests are meant to be “godly offspring,”

The NIV reads it this way:

15 Has not the one God made you? You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring.[d] (NIV)

We read this, and know that the context is marriage, and think, “Oh. The one God seeks Godly offspring?” “Must be talking about two people raising their children in the faith!” And we build theology from a verse that isn’t about having kids at all.

That’s not at all what’s happening here.

Remember, the priests started this entire “Judah is going to pot!” thing by saying: **“Isn’t there one father for all of us, one God who created us? (CEB)**

And now, five verses later, God is putting their own words back in their mouths:

15 Has not [“]the one God made you?[”] You belong to him in body and spirit. And what does the one God seek? Godly offspring.[d] (NIV)

The point is this: You complain about how God is supposed to be everyone’s father, the one who created you all: Well, then, be the godly kids you think you are. That’s what God wants!

Refutation/Answer: Divorce:

Moving on from this second sort of rhetorical slap, we read this (Again, this isn’t the NIV, but the CEB):

You should guard your own spirit. Don’t cheat on the wife of your youth because he hates divorce, says the Lord God of Israel, and he also hates the one covering his garment with violence, says the Lord of heavenly forces. Guard your own life, and don’t cheat.

The NIV translates this whole awkward construction very differently, bringing--I think--greater emphasis to how much God dislikes divorce. But what I appreciate about what I just read is how perfectly it fits the rest of what God has been saying to the priests.

Their focus has been on how terrible Judah has gotten, how idolatrous, and how bad it is that Judah has started to marry

non-Israelite women. God doesn't respond to their concerns directly, doesn't say whether its good or bad to marry non-Israelites, doesn't engage with them at all on their lament--although, as we know, God is not pro-idolatry, right?

But what God does instead is redirect them back to themselves and their own behavior. He checks their false assumption that cheating on an Israelite wife is okay compared to marrying a non-Israelite. He destroys their justifications, which they've been hiding in holy frustration. They're reminded:

"You should guard your own spirit" and "guard your own life"
Don't Cheat. Don't divorce. Don't act violently. But focus on yourselves.

Conclusions: About Marriage?

So today's passage has things to say about marriage, but it only has them to say tangentially, as an aside. Today's passage really isn't about marriage, definitely isn't about the purpose of marriage, at all. It's about the priests terrible hypocrisy, and how that is unfaithful, covenant-breaking, and that's what they should be concerned about.

The priests do describe Judah's idolatry as cheating, as having an affair while they're married to God. They decide to rail against the habit Israelite men have taken up of marrying non-Israelite women, and they think everyone who does

should be booted for purity's sake. After all, they'll just end up worshiping pagan gods alongside their pagan women.

But God says they've got no leg to stand on. They can't rail against others, because their own habits are so bad. They've been cheating on their wives, they've been divorcing them. The priests think that to be unfaithful to your wife who is an Israelite is better than being faithful to a wife who isn't an Israelite. So much better that it's not bad at all. Cheating on your Israelite wife is okay compared to marrying a non-Israelite in the priest eyes.

And God lays out their hypocrisy. You're calling for divorce, when I hate divorce. You're cheating on your wives, while they are staying faithful to theirs. You're claiming me as your father, but you aren't acting like godly children. You should "guard your own spirit." You should "guard your own life."

We won't get into how Ezra would have responded to this.

Conclusions: Justification?

What do we justify as "okay," because it's so much better than the bad thing that other people are doing over there? What do we ignore about ourselves, because it's not as bad as what others do? Because to do that is to make hypocrites of ourselves.

Marriage will always be ripe for this. And here's why: I think

covenants are emotional. They inspire emotion in others and ourselves. Joy, Fear, Regret, Jealousy. The deep commitments that are made in a covenant--and marriage is almost our last covenant--come with deep emotions. And we make judgments about anything that inspires deep emotion in us. We condemn or applaud or rate whatever affects us emotionally.

Beyond this, marriage is public. To be in community with married people is to be affected by what's going on in their marriage.

All this means that we are primed, we are ready to go, when it comes to condemning, to celebrating, to critiquing or deriding the marriage, divorce, and remarriage choices others make. Marriage, and all that goes into it, is low hanging fruit for our judgment, second only, maybe, to how people raise their kids. The priests did a double-knuckleheaded-whammy, by claiming to be good kids with better marriages than others, when they were bad kids with worse marriages than others. It's like it was scripted, their hypocrisy was so powerful.

They call for divorce, which God hates. They cheat on their wives, while those they condemn stay faithful. They claim to be God's kids, but don't act like it. They have neglected to "guard their own spirit" and "guard their own life."

Conclusions: Us

When it comes to the marriages of others, we probably have neglected to guard our own spirits, and guard our own lives, too. And maybe it's not others' marriages--or divorces or remarriages--maybe it's something else.

What today reveals is you tumble off the moral high ground the moment you neglect your own moral behavior. Our frustration with the unholiness of others quickly turns into a different kind of unholiness.

This doesn't mean that we don't make judgments. It doesn't mean that everything is equal, and there is no moral center. It does mean that policing the behavior of others is a dangerous hobby to take up, because our hypocrisy will immediately show. If that's your hobby...well, watch out. God seems to most quickly condemn the sin of those who are in a habit of condemning sin and excusing their own.

“Guard your own life, and don't cheat.” We're told. Or “Be on your guard, and do not be unfaithful.”

Let's be faithful. Let's not cheat. Let's look to our own sin before the sin of others; let's tend our relationship with God before we go pulling weeds out of the relationship God has with someone else. Let's try to make Church a place where marriage, divorce, and remarriage, as topics, don't make us scared and anxious.

And let's at least not ignore this bit of Scripture, even if we ignore other passages in other places. We are children of God, "godly offspring," after all, and these are things our Father asks of us.