

Unworthy Hearts

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[0 : 0 0] Today's scripture reading is found in Malachi, chapter 1, verses 6 to 14. Please follow along as I read. A son honours his father, and a servant his master.

If then I am a father, where is my honour? If I am a master, where is my fear, says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise my name. But you say, how have we despised your name?

By offering polluted food upon my altar. But you say, how have we polluted you? By saying that the Lord's table may be despised.

When you offer blind animals in sacrifice, is that not evil? And when you offer those that are lame or sick, is that not evil? Present that to your governor.

Will he accept you or show you favour, says the Lord of hosts? And now entreat the favour of God. That he may be gracious to us. With such a gift from your hand, will he show favour to any of you, says the Lord of hosts?

[1 : 0 7] O that there were one among you who would shut the doors, that you might not kindle fire upon my altar in vain. I have no pleasure in you, says the Lord of hosts.

And I will not accept an offering from your hand. For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations. In every place, incense will be offered to my name and a pure offering.

For my name will be great among the nations, says the Lord of hosts. But you profane it when you say that the Lord's table is polluted, and its fruit, that is, its food, may be despised.

But you say, what a weariness this is. And you snort at it, says the Lord of hosts. You bring what has been taken by violence, or is lame or sick, and this you bring as your offering?

Shall I accept that from your hand, says the Lord? Cursed be the cheat who has a male in his flock and vows it, and yet sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished. For I am a great king, says the Lord of hosts, and my name will be feared among the nations.

[2 : 1 5] This is the reading of God's word. Please be seated. Good morning, everyone.

If you haven't met me before, my name is Alistair, and I'm one of the pastors here at Watermark Church. But I've only been here for a short time, maybe three months now. So if you haven't met me, then please come and say hello.

I'd love to come and meet you. One of my cousin's kids, I asked her once, she went to school, and it was kind of before, it was like a preschool.

She was only four years old. And I said, so, are there many friends at your preschool? And she said, there are so many friends that I haven't even met them all yet.

And so that's kind of what it's like with you guys. You're all friends, but I haven't met some of you yet. So I hope that I will meet all of you as time goes on. And we have a bunch of people here also that are from overseas and have come and joined us in the elite crowd.

[3 : 26] So it's great to see you guys here. When I visited Watermark last year, actually, you guys were here too. So if you were here last year, I remember you from then. 24 hours ago, I was in Singapore, trying to get ready to pack and leave to come back to Hong Kong.

And I've been on it two weeks away in Taipei and Singapore with Aldrin and also with Eric. And we were on the City to City Redeemer Church Planning Training and Assessment Program.

It was a four-week program, two weeks in Hong Kong, a bit in Taipei, a bit in Singapore. And it was a fantastic time to get to know different church planners from all around the Asia-Pacific area, to see different church plants, including Watermark, in action, in Taipei as well and in Singapore, and to meet some trainers and people who had been church planners, who had done it for maybe two years, five years, ten years, twenty years, and to learn from these people.

It was a great opportunity. And because I knew that I was preaching back here on Sunday, I was preparing kind of during the week as I was away as well, and I thought, oh, that's all right, I've got Saturday to prepare.

And, you know, I'd always wished when I was working in previous jobs that I'd had one of those jobs which would send you flying all over the world, you know, and you'd be able to, like, work from your laptop, and you'd go wherever you like, and you'd see all these different places.

[4 : 55] And so I was kind of experiencing this, and it was really great to be overseas and to be learning from these guys. But I've realized it's actually really hard work to try and work while you're on the go. So, you know, it takes me about probably 15 minutes to really kind of get settled and to think and to pray and to get ready to start the creative process that's required to begin working on a sermon.

But when you're going from airport lounge to airport lounge to plane to off the plane, you only really get about 20 minutes at a sitting. So you just kind of just barely get started, and they're like, okay, final call, Mr. Alistair Chu, kind of thing.

And then when you get on the plane, you finally have some uninterrupted time. But if you happen to be sitting next to a 6'8 giant like Eric happens to be, there isn't a lot of room to move and to put the laptop up and so on.

And it's just, yeah, it's just tricky. So I really thank you for those who've been praying for today. I really need it. We all have things that kind of we wished for maybe when we were younger, but that maybe didn't turn out quite the way that we expected them to.

You know, some kind of disappointment, like with me and the flying thing. But what if we're disappointed in God? What would that look like?

[6 : 20] Suppose we doubted what God had to say and mistrusted him. Or suppose that we had grown weary in serving God, or perhaps lazy, and had a lack of devotion in our hearts.

Suppose that we thought that it was futile to serve God, that there was this futility that we were questioning. You know, is this worth it? Like, what is the purpose of us doing this?

And so we end up dishonoring or disrespecting the name of God. Well, that's the situation which we find ourselves here in Malachi, the first few chapters, where the Israelites have reached a stage where they have grown weary of serving God.

And as a result, they bring dishonor and disrespect to, as it says, the table of the Lord. And as Alfie said before, you can understand it.

Because it had been some time since they had seen kind of the great and marvelous works of God. And when they came back, so these Israelites have been away from the land in exile, punished by God for their disobedience, and they have come back expecting to rebuild their land.

- [7 : 43] But somehow, what they saw in front of them didn't match up to the expectations which they had. And so they were disappointed. They were weary.
- They scoffed at God, and they wondered whether it was worth it at all to serve Him. And this is shown in their sacrifices, when they were bringing unworthy sacrifices to God.
- As it says, they were bringing blind, lame, or diseased animals to God. You can just imagine, you know, you've got a dinner party, right? And someone's, you know, a friend is coming over.
- And let's say you owned a farm, and you had a bunch of sheep out there, and you're going to sacrifice or slaughter one of them for the meal. And, you know, one of them got run over by truck.
- And you're like, oh, that one, that'll do. Let's grab that one, and we'll take that. I mean, he's dead anyway, so, you know, we can just clean it off a bit, get the tire marks off it, and then we'll be good to go. We'll serve it for dinner. What if, instead of a friend, it was, say, the town mayor?
- [8 : 50] Or a sporting hero of yours? Or perhaps the Queen of England, for those of you who are from Commonwealth countries? You show disrespect to your honored guest by what you present on the table.
- And in this case, it's not just an honored guest, but the God of the universe that the Israelites are serving, who saved them again and again, who they are showing disrespect.
- And they grumble and complain about it as well. You know, they say, this is a weariness. And is it worth it to serve God? You see in chapter 3.
- They question God's love for them back in verse 2 of chapter 1. And they felt like it's a burden, a great burden to serve the Lord down there in verse 13.
- Why did they keep doing it then? Why were they bringing these sacrifices, which clearly their heart was not in, out of a sense of obligation, perhaps?
- [9 : 58] A sense of duty. You see, verse 9 tells us that they actually wanted acceptance from God. They wanted to gain His favor. And so they keep doing it in such a way as to, perhaps, that God might show favor to them.
- Warning something from His hand. Or, it could be that they do it to gain approval from others. To be seen to be doing the right thing. Jesus talks about that when He's talking with the Pharisees.
- And He says, He talks about them loving to do their deeds before others. To be seen by others. You see, their practices revealed what is inside their hearts.
- Their unworthy hearts. Because ultimately, there's a lack of love for God in their hearts. Sometimes my dad would often clean up the table.
- And when I say clean up, I don't mean like into the bin. I would mean clean up the food left over by his kids, us, and it would go into his mouth. And often he would say, you know, I'm the laptop tongue, the rubbish bin, right?
- [11 : 14] And that's what he'd call himself. And, you know, it was a joke and so on. But what if, you know, say it's Father's Day or it's birthday, right?
- And we kids are like, you know, creating a card and we pull out, you know, a bit of cardboard from the rubbish bin. It's got a bit of food all over it and kind of scrape it off and we write on that and present that as a gift to him.
- What kind of, how would he take that? What kind of dishonor and disrespect would that be to him? What it would show is that we didn't really care about God.

Sorry, about, we kids wouldn't have cared about our dad. We were just going through the motions. It was just an obligation. And how do you think God feels about the way that the Israelites are going about their sacrifices, going through the motions full of weariness and laziness, full of doubt and mistrust and a lack of devotion?

I'll tell you how he feels. In verse 10, he wishes that they would shut the doors of the temple. They would just shut the doors and close it all up, put out the fires, forget it, go home.

[12 : 32] Don't even bother coming, he says, because your hearts are not there. You haven't come at all, really. You've been, you've left your hearts at home or wherever they're desiring and you're just going through the motions.

A lack of love for God in their hearts means that they're disobeying the greatest commandment, that is to love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength. Well, have you ever felt like this?

Who are we serving? If we're not serving God, then we end up serving ourselves. There are many things that we chase after in the city and in the city where I'm from, in Sydney, people chase after security in the form of property and they chase after status and power and position as defined by wealth.

So the thing that Sydney people, Sydney scientists talk about most, more than anything else, is property, property values and where's the best place to buy and all that kind of thing. And I think it's not that different here in Hong Kong.

People chase after these things and they get enslaved to them, sacrificing their family and friends and relationships and other things on the altar of success, of wealth, of status, of power.

[14 : 03] Who are we serving? Because what we serve is what captures our hearts. You might have a job and you say, I'm serving my boss. But what holds you there, binds you to that position with chains that are stronger than steel, often it's the status and the lifestyle that come with that job.

Or perhaps it's the dream of a better life that might come in the future from this job. And underneath all of that, it's the approval of man that is driving us.

You see, if these are the things that have captured our hearts, the reason why we get up in the morning, then these have effectively displaced God as the number one desire in our hearts.

Because if we're not serving God, we're serving our idols. But you might say, some of us are serving God in our lives. We're heavily involved in church.

We've been following God all our lives. Well, I say, like the Israelites, we too may be serving God to gain approval or acceptance or out of a sense of obligation or duty.

[15 : 20] Obligation means that we're doing it out of fear. We feel a deep need for acceptance, which is why we continue to go through the motions. Or perhaps our identity is so wrapped up in what we do that we keep on doing the Christian thing even though we might have lost the heart for it a long time ago.

This is my story, actually. I've been serving as a minister for five years before I came here to Hong Kong.

And before that, of course, I've been involved in university ministry and through Bible College and so on. And I think over that time, I just felt my heart slipping further and further away from where it should be.

But I was still serving God. I was still going through the motions. I was still continuing to do all the things which were expected of me. But it was out of obligation.

Perhaps out of a sense of identity that this is who I am as someone who serves God. But by then, my heart was no longer in it. And approval, I found as well, that we might try and serve God to impress others or perhaps even to impress ourselves to fulfill our own need for self-fulfillment in this world.

[16 : 52] We serve God, if we serve God out of approval, out of a motivation to look good in front of other people, and we base our self-concept and our self-worth on being the kind of person who is a good person, a moral person, a person who serves God, then that can lead to a couple of things.

First of all, we can look down upon those who don't serve God in as good a way as we do, who don't have the compassion, who don't meet our standards of service.

We'll begin to feel like we deserve acceptance and a better life from God because of what we do and who we are. You see, we're actually doing it to get favor from God, much like the Israelites were.

Oh, and if, somehow, God doesn't favor us as we think we deserve, what happens then? Well, we get angry at Him, deeply angry.

When trials and hardships come as God has said that they will come, we might say, God, it wasn't supposed to be this way. Didn't I do everything? Didn't I give up everything to serve you?

[18 : 04] Why aren't you blessing my ministry, my life? Our unworthy sacrifices also reveal something deeper that is going on. It is our hearts which are unworthy.

So what do we do about it? Or what do we try and do about it? There's two things we try. First of all, is we try harder and then secondly, we give up. We try harder and that's the path of moralism.

We strap on our boots and get out there and think that we can strive ourselves back into service. And that might work for a while.

But what that leads to is a joyless Christianity. One where we've lost the heart of it and we're simply doing it. We're simply forcing ourselves to do that. And it's a Christianity that condemns others as well because we look down our noses at those who can't meet those standards that we do.

But it's tiring living that way. And eventually, we get tired and we give up. God hasn't given us what we wanted and so we walk away.

[19 : 16] And what we're really saying in our hearts is, God, this thing that I wanted from you, this thing that I wanted is greater than my love for you and if I don't get it, then I will abandon you and walk away.

because something else has displaced God in our hearts. Whether it's the approval of humans, whether it's a certain status that we wanted, a certain lifestyle, a certain friendship.

And we forget that even though God has given us everything in our lives and He's been generous upon generous to us, we feel that He's distant and we feel that He's withholding from us and we feel that He's not generous at all.

And like the Israelites, we lose our sense of love and thankfulness and we think of God as a miser withholding from us. And when we think that, then we turn into misers too.

We keep things for ourselves. I'm willing to share ourselves with God and with others. Well, I've gone down both of these paths. Trying harder and then giving up.

[20 : 29] And I started to think of God as one who blessed other people, but not me. And so I turned away from the God who gave me life and breath and everything.

My unworthy heart was shown in my actions. What will God do about our unworthy hearts? He will send one who is worthy to be the sacrifice that we couldn't make.

He sent His Son to redeem us from our unworthiness. You see, Christ came to do what we could not. When He came, He served God fully and wholeheartedly without turning away, without giving up, all the way to the end, without self-seeking.

And He became the truly worthy sacrifice that covered all of the unworthy sacrifices that the Israelites made and all of the unworthy sacrifices that we make.

We're told to look to Christ as our sacrifice. We're told to look to Christ where we have full acceptance from God.

[21 : 50] We're told to look to Christ where we have, where we see divine approval from God. As Christ is the one who sacrificed Himself on the cross, so we see that we can come to Him and be accepted by God.

No longer do we have to fear God's anger, God's punishment. No longer do we have to fear the approval, gaining or not gaining the approval of our fellow human beings.

Because in the cross, God declares that, God declares His love for a people that have walked away from Him. For a humanity that has turned their back on Him, God reaches down and rescues us.

It's not enough that God has created us, created the world that we live in, created the stars and the heavens and the trees that we see, the air that we breathe. It's not enough for us.

We're still turned away. And so God came into the world, became one of us, died for us to win us back.

[23 : 02] That's the kind of God that we serve. The kind of God who wins us, whose acceptance we don't need to try and achieve. What that means is that we can now be free.

Freed from that sense of obligation, of duty. Freed from that sense that I had before of feeling like I had to go through the motions to just continue doing this thing because this was my identity.

My identity is now in Christ. And what that means for me is that I'm free to worship Him regardless of whether I'm a pastor, regardless of whether I'm teaching or not, regardless of what I'm doing.

I'm a child of God first and foremost. We can now be free to offer our sacrifices whether it's time, money, gifts, labor, even our families.

We can offer it to Him without fear. We can offer it to Him without fear of missing out because in Christ we see that God is generous.

[24 : 25] we don't need to worry or fear about missing out of what God gives to us. As Jesus said, those who follow me, those who have given up much for me will receive many times in this world and then eternal life in the world to come.

And we don't need to fear punishment because in Christ we see that God is forgiving. And these were the things that the Israelites were worried about. They were worried that they would miss out if they gave more of what they had to God because they saw God as somebody who was holding stuff tight and they were afraid of punishment.

You see, it's a totally different way of relating to God. I call it thankfulness and it's kind of like a jealousy. A jealousy, a kind of a, what kids do, you know, when they snatch things away from one another.

They say, this is mine, this is mine. We do that to God because we feel like He hasn't provided for us. If He hasn't given us enough, then we have to, with our own two hands, take what is ours.

Instead of being like the Israelites who grumbled and complained about God, bringing their diseased and crippled sacrifices to God, having hardened hearts that lost their love for God long ago, we can see afresh the love of God for us.

[25 : 52] We can realize that He has given us everything and withheld not even His own Son. And what happens is that as our vision of God changes, as we see God who He truly is, as we turn away from seeing God as some kind of miser who holds on to things and refuses to give them to us, to being one who abundantly and generously and overflowingly gives us of His love and His acceptance and His favor, then we too can change from being miserly to overflowing with thankfulness, to being generous of spirit.

And we won't hold on tight with clenched fists the things that we have to protect ourselves, but instead we'll be open, open-hearted with our friendship, with our relationships, with our service, with our wealth, regardless of whether we have much or little.

Will we open with our very hearts because our very hearts will have been captured by the wonder of the heart of God who came, who sent His Son to come and die for us.

And I need to hear this as much, if not more, than any of you. And it's a journey that we're all on together. And one of the great things that I love about our church here at Watermark is that we are on this journey together.

You see, we learn the gospel in community and we help each other on knowing that none of us have yet made it, but that we're all heading towards the same goal and that is Christ.

[27 : 33] And so, won't you join me in heading towards Christ, in giving up the loves that take us away from God and in following after the things of our own hearts instead of having our hearts captured by the wonder of God.

Let's pray. Father God, we thank you so much that even though we come to you with unworthy hearts, you are one who is worthy.

And we pray that you would help us to be captured by your love, your worthiness, and your son.

We thank you that Jesus came to sacrifice himself for us. We thank you that we are people that even though we bring nothing to you, you've done everything for us.

Father, we know that even the sacrifices that we make are not worthy of you and our hearts are often mixed in their motivations. But Father, we ask that you would purify us, that you give us such a vision of who you are that would never leave us, that would encourage us when we're feeling the things of this world.

[29 : 05] Father, help us instead to overflow with thankfulness as a response to who you are and what you've done for us. we pray that we would also reflect that love towards one another and to this world.

Amen.