

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

Last time we saw that God said in v6 "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 today that 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 all well and good and in some ways really admirable) they need to be their father and mother, because that is what God has prescribed, and that is how it was meant to be! And God uses the example of those priests, the ones 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 placed defiled food on my altar." Remember I pointed out, that the heart and soul of the giver was reflected in that which they gave. And for the priests, it was reflected in what they accepted from the hands of the giver. I explained that those prescriptions by God for sin, were very specific. The animal had to be pure, without disease or defect, and all of one colour when in regard to sin. Because symbolically, all of those sin sacrifices pointed to Jesus, the spotless, sinless Lamb of God, and what He would go on to do upon that cross of suffering and shame!

Again remember, those animal sacrifices could not do away with any sin no matter how trivial, only Jesus can do that. "No one comes to the Father except by me" He said. But certainly, the heart and spirit of the sinner was clearly seen, in what and how he sought to make atonement as it were, for his sin! "When you bring blind animals for sacrifice, is that not wrong?" "When you sacrifice crippled or diseased animals, is that not wrong?"

Well of course the answer to both questions is yes, it is wrong. And yet so derelict in their duties were those priests 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 do you think of me?'* God is in effect 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.'*

Which is where we pick up the text this morning: Malachi 1:10-14 'It's All About The Heart; and Useless Fires! And here we see, it's as though God cries out in anguish v10 "O that one of you would shut the temple doors." So it is very clear then, as we have seen many times before, that outward forms of religiousness or religious practises, where never what God desired or was looking for from His people. It is as though He were 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 know 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 something like this: *'God has got to change your heart before he changes your shirt'*. 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 ember 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.'" You see here is a vision of a righteous high priest in comparison to those in Malachi's and Zechariah's day. Joshua. And his name means the Lord saves.

And what we have here is very similar to that imagery in chapters one and two of the book of Job. When all of the angels are gathered there before the Lord, and Satan also comes to accuse the servants of God!

I heard a sermon many years ago, and the preacher explained how Joshua is dressed in these filthy clothes, literally meaning that he was covered in human excrement, with a stench that would have reached to heaven itself, because he was the high priest! You see every 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 just for that occasion, and once he was, only then would he go in and make the offering. But again 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, indeed, God had accepted that offering from the high priest for yet another year. It is where we get the term holy smoke from.

But in Zechariah 3, "Joshua is dressed in filthy clothes." And why? Well you see it's 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 can you see, God rebukes the accuser, in effect saying, *'Close your mouth Evil One, speak not against my servant for he is a burning ember snatched from the fire.'* Yes 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. That we can be filthy on the outside and yet we may well be clean and pure on the inside. And on the other hand, though our clothes be clean, prim and proper, yes though we look good on the outside, the stench of our sin may well yet be reaching 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 all important. But from the vision of Joshua in Zechariah 3, we can see that 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 v4 of Zechariah 3 again: "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 Rosemary 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 heart and the soul! "O that one of you would shut the temple doors, so that you would not like useless fires on my altar. I am not pleased with you and I will accept, no offering from your hands."

So again can you see? If our heart is not right with God, then the stuff that we supposedly do in His Name is just stuff. God doesn't need our stuff. He has got enough stuff of His own. What He is after is a heart which is repentant, and sorry for sin. And also a response in our life, which reflects the gratitude of "an 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, do you see? It's all about playing the game of being Christian and being men pleasers. Or worse still, being deceived ourselves, because God doesn't play games!

Beloved, we must not “light useless fires” upon the altar of God. But what is the altar of God? Yes where is sin truly dealt with and paid for? Well of course it’s the Cross of the Lord Jesus Christ. And in today’s world, in our modern society what are “useless fires,” upon the altar which is Christ’s Cross? Well may I suggest, that it is trying to have God’s Grace and Mercy upon our own terms. Surely that’s what Israel was doing in the days of Zechariah and Malachi. The people were bringing their sacrifices, the priests were lighting those sacrificial fires and sacrificing those animals, but it was all to no avail. Because it was all “useless” as both the sinner and the priest, were not actually dealing with the problem which was at the core of the matter. A broken relationship with God!

And now I say these following things with all sensitivity dear friends: someone can go to church all of their lives, they can put their money in the bag each week, they can smile and say all of the right things, and have cups of tea and cake and then go home. And yet it can all add up to nothing. Because if they haven’t been confronted with their own sin, yes if they haven’t in their hearts and in their minds eyes stood at the foot of Christ’s Cross and looked with horror, (but also gratitude in their hearts 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 quite simple and clear. You need but only come to Him, fall before Him, and all will be well. As the old hymn goes ‘It is well, it is well, it is well with my soul! But friends no matter what we do, here is God’s inevitable outcome. V11 “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.” And let’s remember the context of these words. A thankless, an unbelieving, adulterous people, who were the people of God in name only! They had contempt for Him, His Name, His Commandments 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 any way you please. Well you are wrong!

Romans 10:1-4 “Brothers, my heart 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 last time, the Israelites needed their puny view of God expanded. 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? Well 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 Father’s will is that everyone who looks to the Son and believes in him shall have eternal life, and I will raise him up at the last day.” He’s talking about the true church. Not to 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 praises are not from men, but from God." Again, the Jews believed that they had exclusive ownership and rights to God through their history and ancestry. Well God says no! Because God's true church for whom Christ suffered and 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. Baptising them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit." Malachi 1:11 "My name will be great among the nations."

And when God speaks of "incense and pure offerings" He simply means heartfelt worship. It is what all of those sacrifices and offerings were supposed to be! John 4:23-24 "Yet a time is coming and has now come when the true worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and Truth, for they are the kind of worshippers the Father seeks. God is Spirit, and his worshippers must worship in Spirit and in truth."

No, lip service was never what God was looking for 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 his heart and soul 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, begged Jesus, "Lord let me go with you." Yes change lives.

Heart religion, that was always the true intention of the law of God, and indeed all of the Word of God! Look at verse 12 "But you profane it." "Profane" what? The Name of God of course. Now we often think of profanity as some kind of swear word, but as Christians, that is not the whole story. I remember a preacher years ago preaching on the Ten Commandments, and when preaching on the third, "thou shalt not take the Name of the Lord Thy God in vain for the Lord will not hold anyone guiltless who missuses His Name." He explained 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 Jesus and His sacrifice! Then He again speaks of "injured, crippled and diseased animals" as offerings for sin. So twice in this short chapter of scripture God condemns those things!

Brothers and sisters, it is very clear that the things which we offer up to God are so very important to Him, because as I have said, it is a clear indication as to what is going on within our hearts. Now does God need my \$10, \$20, \$40, \$50 or \$100 a week to save his people? No. As someone said to me many years ago, 'Roy we can sit on our hands on our verandas for the rest of our lives and God will still save His people.' And the truth is Beloved, that it is between you and God what you dedicate to Him of your time, your efforts and your finances.

But I guess the question is dear friends, Do we consider the hope and eternity to which we have been brought, bought, paid for and saved, a worthy investment in this life? Look at how condemning God's Words are in v14 "Cursed is the cheat." Well who is the cheat? A swindler, perhaps a thief, a deceiver, a crook! And notice what he says by way of definition. It is of 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.

Beloved do you ever feel that way? Well I must confess that I often do. Often feel that I am a 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, my actions, seem so often to be merely “useless fires” upon the altar of God. But I'm always heartened by God's patience and mercy to me, and also gladdened by the reality that God doesn't need me to be a superhero. He just calls me to be faithful. Yes simple faithful obedience, is what He requires. And a simple and sincere heart! As we saw in V2 “I have loved you says the Lord.”

Praise God for His goodness and patience with us. Indeed His Mercies are new every morning!

Let's pray.