

Holiness Opposed

1:6-14

“A son honors his father, and a servant his master. Then if I am a father, where is My honor? And if I am a master, where is my respect?” says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests who despise My name. But you say, ‘How have we despised Thy name?’ . . .” (1:6-14).

Genuine holiness is a marvelous character trait. It is seen in the lives of those who respect God’s Word and exert caution to imitate His holy character. Peter shows us that holiness is not an optional matter, “Be holy yourselves also in all your behavior” (1 Peter 1:15b; Philippians 2:15). True holiness is recognized by our Lord as arising from a “pure heart” (Matthew 5:6, 8). The beauty of this godly trait is described by Paul in Colossians 3 as he speaks of Christians focusing on heavenly qualities and living a holy life (Colossians 3:1-15). Perhaps a simple definition can be, “Holiness is a visible practice that results from the invisible control of God.”

The inner control of holiness is illustrated by Lycurgus. He would allow none of his laws to be written down. He wanted the principles of government interwoven into the lives of his people. He knew that the happiest are those who willingly submit to restrictions and guidelines. So he educated his people in such a manner that the laws were imprinted upon their minds. In this way the laws remained perpetually before them. This kind of inner control is seen in genuine holiness. Those who faithfully abide by the Sov-

ereign King’s commands are the ones who have His holy Word engraved upon their hearts. Nothing can erase God’s will from their lives. They find joy and happiness because they possess a purity of heart that follows a deep devotion.

To multiply the number of Bibles that are on shelves or tables is easy. It is more difficult, though, to multiply copies of “walking Scriptures” in the form of holy lives. These are able to say, “Thy word have I hid in my heart.” Such is a beautiful sight!

You would think that everyone would enjoy the beauty which holiness brings, that all would relish its presence and practice. Incredibly, some oppose this virtue (cf. Acts 18:5, 6; 1 Timothy 6:20). Some do all they can to oppose God’s holiness at home, in schools, at work, and in recreation. We expect such opposition from the world, but it can shake our faith when we see a fellow Christian opposing holiness!

From the pages of ancient history, we find an instance where holiness was opposed by God’s people. Malachi’s words are directed to those who were guilty of rejecting God’s commands and resting upon self-centered goals in life. Although Israel was God’s holy nation, she was opposed to God’s holiness. It was a tragic situation, and Malachi boldly confronted it.

THE MOST COMMON MANNER OF OPPOSITION

Malachi’s charge was that Israel opposed

God's holiness with a common failing—she was guilty of *hypocrisy*! The priests and the people were identified as God's favored nation. They sacrificed and served in the temple, but they were hypocrites! Look at the context to see how this happened.

The Exile was over, the temple had been rebuilt, and daily life was routine. Israel's religion was also routine. The special devotion to enliven her faith was missing. The problem with casual Christianity is that it does not require much thought or practice. This inevitably leads to hypocrisy. The hypocrisy is not a deliberate choice but rather a subtle process. This happened to the returned exiles.

The process of being ensnared in hypocrisy is illustrated by Israel in Malachi's prophecy. Everything followed the same routine at the temple. The priests were there and offered the required sacrifices. But the Israelites as they worshiped failed to keep the seriousness of the worship in mind. Soon "polluted" sacrifices were being offered to God. The blind, the sick, and the lame were brought to God while the healthy animals were kept at home. At first, Israel probably reasoned that it did not make "much difference" what was offered as long as an offering was made. Soon the polluted offerings were all that appeared. The Israelites would come, sacrifice, and leave. They performed the "motions" but lacked sincerity. The holiness that should have resulted from their worship could not exist.

Hypocrisy prevents holiness from blessing lives. It causes the beauty of holiness to be corrupted. A missionary among the American Indians was asked, "Why do you desire the Indians to become Christians, since the Christians are worse than the Indians? The Christians lie, steal, and drink worse than the Indians. They first taught the Indians to be drunk. They steal to the degree that their chiefs are obliged to hang them for it, and that is not enough to deter others from stealing. We will not consent, therefore, to become Christians, so we won't become as bad as they. We'll live as our fathers lived, and go where our fathers are when we die." This missionary did all he could to explain that God did not want the Indians to become as those "Christians." But he could not convince him. The hypocrisy of a few condemned the souls of many.

Not only is hypocrisy responsible for cor-

rupting the souls of those outside of Christ, but it also corrupts many who are within the fold of salvation. Many Christians are discouraged and led astray because holiness is opposed by the hypocrisy of some Christians (Jude 12; 2 Peter 2:13; 3 John 9-11). Our religious practices cannot become as those in Malachi's day nor our holiness become hypocrisy!

THE MOST COMMON PRACTICES OF THIS OPPOSITION

Many think it is impossible that they could be filled with hypocrisy as were those Israelites and, therefore, oppose God's holiness. We must "take heed" (1 Corinthians 10:11, 12). As we examine Israel's practices, we find that the hypocrisy of Israel resulted from three failings. Three dramatic flaws paved the way for their blatant hypocrisy. The sobering fact is that these three failings are possible in the Christian's life as well. Unless we "take heed," we can become like hypocritical Israel.

First, *Israel failed to show God respect (1:6)*. Here is the greatest danger of a "routine religion": It leads to a total loss of respect for God. Malachi's rebuke is a common sense argument. There is always a demand for respect or honor to be given to the One who is greater.

Israel revealed a total *disrespect* for God. God asked, "Where is My respect? Where is My honor?" The nation of His special love gave Him neither respect nor honor. The saddest thing about this was they saw nothing wrong in what they did! (1:6b). Their service to God was a great insult, yet they saw no "evil" in it (1:8a). They were saying, "It is only a sacrifice, so it does not matter that much." Within their hearts was a lack of concern for God's honor. They failed to possess the "pure heart" that was so essential in fostering holiness (Matthew 5:8).

As we consider Israel's failure to respect God, let us also contemplate our behavior in this area. Do we show God the respect that is due Him? God has not changed. Honor and respect are still due Him. How can Christians today show proper respect to God? One way is by prompt obedience to His will. First Peter 1:14 addresses us as "children of obedience." As our Father in heaven, God deserves respect from His children. This respect is demonstrated best by prompt obedience to His will (cf. 1 Peter 1:13-18; Psalms 40:8). A second

way is by constant service in His cause. God expects His children to honor Him in their day-to-day lives. A third way is by a loving respect. A child who loves his parents will show them the greatest respect. That child understands the love his parents have for him. Parental love nurtures respect from children. Such is true with God, who has bestowed on us a marvelous love. When we understand divine love, we will be delighted to show respect (cf. 1 John 4:19; James 1:17).

Second, *Israel failed to show God sincerity* (1:7-12). Paul stated the principle of sincerity in 1 Corinthians 10:31: "Whatever you do, do all to the glory of God." This principle governs all we do in religion. It applied to Israel, but the nation ignored it. Their religion had degenerated into an indecent performance which should have stirred their shame. But it did not.

The priesthood showed their lack of sincerity. The priests took God's name in vain by offering unacceptable sacrifices (1:7, 12). The skimpy and blemished animals offered to God were fruits of a cheapened religion that violated God's laws (cf. Leviticus 22:17-25; Nehemiah 5:14, 15).

Their worship services showed their lack of sincerity. Their religion was void of all meaning. It was "second rate" worship with leftovers for God.

Christians must beware of this danger. It is too easy to allow the sincerity of our faith to become polluted. Paul's exhortation to the Philippians was "in order to be sincere and blameless" (Philippians 1:10). As we assemble for worship, let us all examine our hearts to see that sincerity is present.

This failing brought God's harshest rebuke (cf. 1:10). God looked at Israel's insincerity and said that it would have been better for them to have shut the doors and cancel worship services than to conduct them with such gross insincerity! How terrible it would be if God were to view our worship assemblies in this manner. We must guard against that which caused Israel to become insincere. After examining the text, we find that the Israelite's insincerity was due to a thoughtlessness when preparing for worship (1:7), a shallow devotion to God's control (1:8, 9), a mechanical practice in religion that was void of spirit (1:10), and a casual regard for the Almighty's name (1:11, 12).

Third, *Israel failed to show God sensitivity* (1:13). How jealous God is concerning the way we worship Him! Israel looked at their worship as a weariness. They viewed it with contempt. This was in direct conflict with a promise the returned exiles had made (cf. Nehemiah 10:39b).

In two ways Malachi presented this failing (1:13). He spoke of Israel viewing the service as "tiresome." This word refers to travail (cf. Exodus 18:8). What should have been a delightful pleasure was extreme drudgery. Malachi also spoke of Israel "sniffing at" the worship. This phrase refers to an expression of great contempt. It is like an animal which sniffs at some food and then walks away from it. Both terms reveal the utter insensitivity of Israel to God.

How could Israel have responded like this? How could she have been so bored with spiritual things? The nation had lost her sensitivity for spiritual matters. Some today have joined Israel in this sad condition (cf. Hebrews 10:29). They find the assemblies "boring" and display contempt for God by habitual absence (cf. Hebrews 10:23-26). Let us learn from Israel's folly and remain sensitive toward God.

CONCLUSION

As Malachi concludes, he focuses on some serious lessons that apply today (1:14). Those who hinder God's holiness by showing Him disrespect, insincerity, and insensitivity will face severe trials. Although we live in a world that says consequences do not always return to haunt us, God's Book assures us that whatever we sow, we will reap!

The Scriptures teach that God is the Sovereign, we are His subjects; He is the Master, we are His servants; He is the Father, and we are His children. We, thus, have unavoidable obligations. We face a Sovereign whose power we cannot shun, a Father whose love is unmistakable, and a Master whose commands cannot be dismissed! May we never be in the unthinkable position of opposing His holiness.

Striving to live for God is often met with opposition. Often it is tempting to give in or give up and play the part of the hypocrites. But we must remain strong so we will not oppose God's holiness. When the battle of Corioli was being won because of the courage given the soldiers by the passion and vigor of Caius Marcius, they

turned to see their leader covered with wounds and blood. They begged him to retire to camp. In response he stated, "It is not for conquerors to be tired!" Such should be the motto of every Chris-

tian warrior. Let all be stirred to a zeal and courage to fight the good fight of faith.

—John Kachelman

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