

An "Average" Holiness

2:17

"You have wearied the Lord with your words. Yet you say, 'How have we wearied Him?' In that you say, 'Everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and He delights in them,' or, 'Where is the God of justice?'" (2:17).

One irreligious man used to "average" his morality. He said, "I'm doing pretty well on the whole. I sometimes get mad and swear, but then I'm strictly honest. I work on Sunday when I'm busy, but I give a good bit to the poor, and I was never drunk in my life." The man hired a Scotchman to build a fence around his pasture and gave him special instructions to make it strong. When he finished, he was asked, "Is the fence built tight and strong?" The Scotchman replied, "I can't say it is all tight and strong, but on the average it is a pretty good fence. If some parts are a bit weak, other parts are extra strong. I may have left a gap here and there a yard or so wide, but then I made up for it by doubling the rails in other parts. The cattle will find it a good fence on the whole and will like it." "What?" asked the man. "Do you mean to tell me that you've built a fence around my lot where an opening can be made? The cattle will be sure to find it and go out. Don't you know that a fence must be perfect or it is worthless?" "I used to think so," said the Scot, "but I heard you talk about averaging matters with the Lord, and it seemed to me that we might try it with the cows. If an average fence won't do for a cow, I'm afraid

that an average character won't do for the Lord on Judgment Day."

Malachi 2:17 described a time in Israel's history in which the nation tried to pass God's criteria of holiness with an "average" character. Israel did some things right and other things wrong. Overall, they believed that their good would outweigh their bad, and even if they "just made it," that would be all right.

Many today have innocently said, "I don't care if I have a mansion of gold in heaven or not. I'll be content to just barely make it there!" We commend ourselves for doing "pretty good, on the average," but we can quickly point out a number of areas that need immediate change.

In Malachi's day, Israel had confused God's demands for holiness in everyday living. Their conclusion that an "average" holiness would be accepted was fatal. Believing in the validity of an "average" holiness led to total confusion regarding God's commands!

The context of 2:17 suggests five tragic consequences which arise when we try to "average" our holiness before God. (1) Israel casually regarded God which led to a dishonoring of His majesty (1:1-6). (2) The nation's worship was pretentious and corrupt (1:7-14). (3) Israel failed to adhere to God's will and modified the divine regulations to please their selfishness (2:1-9). (4) They allowed selfishness to become their governing standard (1:9). (5) The Israelites acted treacherously toward one another (1:10-16). They

tried to “average” their holiness but found themselves in flagrant disobedience to the two great commands of mankind. They failed to love God with “all” of their being, and they failed to love their fellow man (Matthew 22:36-40). God expects people to serve Him with “all” their heart, soul, and mind. But whenever we begin to “average” holiness, we become guilty of partial commitment. This doomed Israel in that day and will do so in our time as well.

Israel’s conduct was inappropriate, and they knew it. Their faith was hypocritical. They had allowed themselves to be confused about God’s commands. They thought that they could “balance” the wrongs in their lives with a few rights. Malachi’s message was that tragic results would come if they did not change (cf. 3:1-5). This was not the first time that Israel had behaved like this. Several prophets had addressed this confused thinking. Zephaniah said, “I will search Jerusalem with lamps, and I will punish the men who are stagnant in spirit, who say in their hearts, the Lord will not do good or evil” (1:12; cf. Isaiah 5:20; Amos 5:7; Proverbs 17:15). Had Israel remembered their history, they would have known better.

Today, Christians have strong pressures to live a “partial” commitment to God and to “average” their holiness. In response to these pressures, 2:17 stands as a warning.

THE WARNING: IT “WEARIES” GOD

Malachi told Israel that their actions had caused God to be “weary.” The primary meaning of the word “weary” is “to work until one is exhausted.” God was exhausted by Israel’s attitudes. From this verse, we see that some were skeptical about God’s care for them. This skepticism led them to say, “God doesn’t care about us! If He did, then things would be different.” The murmuring wearied the Almighty.

Not only did skepticism cause murmuring, but some Israelites acted arrogantly to God’s commands. They denied the objective morality of His will. Right and wrong became matters of personal choice. This was a heavy burden to a righteous God.

Have you thought of how weary God must become today? He is still wearied by those who know what He expects them to do, but do not do

it (Isaiah 43:23, 24). He is wearied by those who repeatedly ask for forgiveness of a sin and never try to change (Psalms 5:4-6). He is fatigued by those who are hypocritical (Isaiah 1:13, 14). When Christians are inconsistent, the heavenly Father is exhausted.

The very God who controls all around us and supports all of us, the very One who can never “faint nor be weary” (Isaiah 40:28-31; Psalms 6:8), is exhausted by the sinful behavior of those who call Him “Father”!

THE ORIGIN: IT COMES FROM “YOUR WORDS”

Malachi boldly struck at the root of Israel’s confused practices. He addressed the self-guided, self-deluded doctrine which the nation had been following. The phrase “your words” refers to the arrogance of those who presumed to modify God’s will (2:9). They had allowed themselves to be convinced that total devotion to God was unnecessary. In this reference we find a troubling revelation of the way an “average” holiness can creep into our lives. The subtle danger follows this course. We are tempted to sin, but we know that sin is wrong. However, if we can stir doubt as to whether the act is “really” sin we will not feel as guilty about doing it. Wanting to think that “since times have changed,” the act is permitted in some circumstances, we begin to imagine that it is right in our circumstance. After a while, our practices do not prompt any question on our part at all. Finally, the path is cleared to participate in the sin we originally rejected! The self-deception is complete because our own “words” have convinced us! This subtle deception is alluded to by the psalmist: “Though while he lives he congratulates himself—and though men praise you when you do well for yourself—he shall go to the generation of his fathers; . . . Man in his pomp, yet without understanding, is like the beasts that perish” (Psalms 49:18-20; cf. Hosea 12:8).

It is easy to “talk yourself into” the practice of sin when you begin to “average” your holiness. The one comment that often reveals an “averaged holiness” goes something like this: “I know this is wrong, but I’m doing these things right. It should all balance!” Such thinking “wearies” our great God!

THE RATIONALISM: IT USES “EVERYONE” TO JUSTIFY ITSELF

Israel looked around and saw that some who practiced sin were successful. She began to think that if these sinners were not punished then neither would they be punished. The cynics pointed out that God’s people were left in low estate while the heathen were prosperous (cf. Psalms 73:2-13). When Israel compared their spirituality with that of the surrounding pagans, they began to question God’s justice.

Many today find comfort in comparing themselves with those in the world. We often hear others object to restraints on conduct by saying, “If it is wrong, why don’t they suffer?” Many are fooled into thinking that material prosperity is a sign of God’s special favor (Psalms 73:12, 13). When you look around, you find many who say the same words as Israel.

But listen to Malachi—an appeal to “everyone” will never justify an “average” holiness (cf. Psalms 37:1, 9-11). This article addresses the problem:

Guidelines

The test of character is not whether you conform to moral standards when they are the community norm, but whether you continue to adhere to them when the community strays elsewhere.

Morality and majority have little in common!

Majority can go anywhere; morality is anchored to principle.

Majority says, “Nearly everyone is doing it, so it must be right,” and morality says, “Popularity is not a substitute for personal accountability.”

Majority says, “Whoopee!”; morality says, “Wherefore!”

Majority seeks new laws; morality strives to obey God’s laws.

Majority always runs with the pack; morality often stands alone.

The biggest decision any young man or woman will ever make is whether to be governed by “Majority” or “Morality.”

To appeal to “everyone” as the justification of our action is wrong (cf. Exodus 23:2; Genesis 7:1; Matthew 7:13, 14; Joshua 24:15). The divine conclusion is that all who try to “average” their holiness by comparing themselves with another, is “without understanding” (2 Corinthians 10:12).

THE IGNORANCE: IT IS SHOWN BY CLAIMING “GOD DELIGHTS”

Israel saw the circumstances as they wanted them to be and pronounced them just as they wanted them to be! Thus evil became good, and they said God delighted in sin! The saddest part of this verse is knowing that Israel really believed this deluded conclusion.

The same shocking ignorance of Israel is evident today. People practice sin and try to balance it with good works. They believe that “God delights” in their practices. This ignorance begins when people think a mortal mind knows better than the immortal mind (Proverbs 14:12). It is furthered by man’s refusal to believe God’s truth (Jeremiah 44:15-17). It progresses into rebellion by believing man is “pure” (Proverbs 30:12). It concludes whenever man believes his “average” holiness is better than others (Luke 18:11).

An “average” holiness is ignorant of true spiritual status (cf. Revelation 3:17; Jeremiah 5:10-17).

CONCLUSION

An “average” holiness can cause us to stop striving for the committed devotion God demands. We will stop practicing the strict morality required by God (Romans 12:1, 2).

These words still challenge the sin of an “average” holiness:

Live by old ethics and the classical rules of honesty. Put no new names or notions upon authentic virtues and vices. Think not that morality is ambulatory; that vices in one age are not vices in another; or that virtues which are under the everlasting seal of right reason may be stamped out by opinion! And therefore, though vicious times invert the opinions of things, and set up new ethics against virtue, yet hold thou unto old morality; and rather than follow a multitude to do evil, stand like Pompey’s pillar conspicuous by thyself, and single in integrity.

Those who become insensitive to goodness have no hope because they will become insensitive to God. Hope for pure Christianity lies in our never trying to “average” holiness in order to “just barely make it” to heaven.

—John Kachelman

The Wearied Lord
(Malachi 2:17)

Israel had wearied God with her words. They were words that. . . .

1. . . . confused basic morality (2:17).
2. . . . questioned his promises (2:17).
3. . . . compromised His commands (2:9).
4. . . . led to treating others with treachery (2:14).
5. . . . displayed error in worship (2:11).

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