

The Wife of Your Youth

David H. Roper

Turn again to the hook of Malachi, chapter 2. Our last two times together I have pointed out that the problem this fifth-century B.C. prophet is concerned with is a loss of love within the nation. The Israelites' love had grown cold. They had lost that sense of the presence of God's love, and thus were unable to respond to his love. That lack of love was being felt in all of society, and particularly in their homes. It is this section that we are concerned with this morning, as Malachi takes a look at the Jews' home life, the relationship between husband and wife, and describes the coldness of their love in the home.

Every time you talk about the home it is a relevant issue because that is where we live. It is almost trite to say that our homes are in trouble and that we, as a people, in terms of our home life, are disintegrating. Our home life has been disintegrating for a long time. It is just more apparent today. I have a friend who describes homes of a generation ago as medieval cathedrals, supported by flying buttresses". Flying buttresses are external arches that were designed to support the structure of a cathedral from the outside, preserving the clean lines within. If buttresses were used, the cathedral would not have to be supported internally. My friend says this was the way homes were a generation ago. They were just as empty as they are today; there were no internal supports. But externally they were supported by society. There was a social consensus that husband and wife ought to stay together for life, and so homes were supported from the outside. But now, with the loss of these external controls, homes are crumbling almost overnight. Not only are people having problems in their homes, but they are actually questioning the institution itself. They are asking whether marriage is a viable institution for our age.

I was surprised to see an article in the Palo Alto Times a couple of weeks ago concerning a number of women, most of them middle-aged, who were having children, intending to raise those children without a husband or a father. These single women didn't accidentally become pregnant outside of wedlock, but deliberately chose to have children and to raise those children without a husband or a father. I suppose I was more shocked that I was not shocked. It is almost as though you would expect this sort of thing to happen.

Marriage, as an institution, is under fire. Is it relevant for today? Reading between the lines a bit, you can see where most of these women were coming from. Most of them either did not see a model of a husband or a father in their own homes, and therefore feel that a husband or a father is irrelevant in raising children. Or, in a prior marriage, they did not see a husband taking his proper place. This is the attitude that society is selling, but it is not one that we, as believers, can buy.

Marriage is an institution that God has established. It is the second relationship established in the book of Genesis. The first is the relationship to God himself, but the second is the relationship between a man and his wife. It is a divine institution, and is not really up for grabs or open to question. Paul says to do away with marriage is a doctrine of demons. Therefore we need to see what God's plan is, and to order our homes according to God's standards. This is what Malachi does in this section.

It has always been interesting to me that in the book of Exodus one of the plagues that fell on Egypt was the plague of darkness; the entire land of Egypt was dark. But interestingly enough, there was light in the dwellings

of the Israelites. I believe that is symbolic for us today. In the midst of all this darkness, our homes need to be light, sources of truth and revelation and righteousness. And they can be if we follow the admonitions of this passage in Malachi. In this Old Testament book, tucked away in seven verses that normally are overlooked, some very profound things are said about the nature of marriage. There are two issues at stake. The first is found in chapter 2, verses 10 through 12.

"Do we not all have one father?"

The reference here is not to Abraham but to God. This statement parallels the next.

"Has not one God created us?"

Malachi is saying what Paul says in 1 Corinthians 8, "Do we not have one God, the Father, who is over all things?" Malachi is talking about the Israelites' oneness as a nation under God. They had been created by God; he is their Father.

"Why do we deal treacherously each against his brother so as to profane the covenant of our fathers? Judah has dealt treacherously [or faithlessly], and an abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem; for Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord which He loves..."

This is one of the few references in the Old Testament where it is clear that it is the people of God who are the sanctuary, rather than the temple. The temple was merely the symbol of the greater truth, that God wants to dwell in his people. Here he clearly refers to the people of God as the sanctuary where God lives, and which he loves. By their action, whatever this action was, the Israelites somehow were profaning all of society, violating the relationship that this society had to God.

"...and has married the daughter of a foreign god."

That is the first issue. In the Old Testament idiom, "the daughter of" or "the son of" refers to relationship. The specific issue at stake here is marriage to Gentile idolaters. Israelite men were choosing as brides women from the Gentile world who were idolaters. Verse 12 says,

"As for the man who does this, may the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob everyone who awakes and answers, or who presents an offering to the Lord of hosts."

We are not sure what that means, "those who awake and answer", but probably it is intended to refer to the entire nation. We use expressions like this frequently. For example, when we say, "That's the long and the short of it," or when we say, "Everyone was there, the great and the small," we mean everyone. That is evidently what this idiom means. God will cut off anyone and everyone who does this. In other words, not only do these marriages affect society, but they will somehow affect the individual, resulting in destruction in his own life. The issue is intermarriage with idolatrous women.

We need to recall that intermarriage was not some racial hangup that the Jews had; their concern was spiritual. They were not prohibited from marrying Gentiles in general, and there are many illustrations in the Old Testament of marriages between Jews and Gentiles. The most striking, of course, is Ruth, who was a Moabite. She is in our Lord's genealogy, a Gentile. But the issue here is idolatry. Jews were not to marry Gentiles who were idolatrous. They could marry Gentiles if they followed the Lord God of Israel, as Ruth did. Ruth said to Naomi, "Your people shall be my people; your God shall be my God." She stopped worshiping Chemosh, the god of the Moabites, and started worshiping Jehovah, and was incorporated right into the nation. So the Jews

weren't racists. The God of Israel was concerned about the purity of the people of God, that they not marry idolaters. Now evidently the Jews were prohibited from marrying Canaanites because the Canaanites were so locked into their idols. But even among the Canaanites there were exceptions. Rahab the harlot was a Canaanite who worshiped the Lord God of Israel. The real issue was idolatry. Whenever anyone in Israel married an idolater from outside of Israel, it almost always resulted in chaos in the nation. Idolatry had destroyed the nation once before, and that was why Malachi was so concerned. They must not do this again.

This truth expressed in Malachi is found throughout all of Scripture: the basis of any marriage relationship is spiritual. The foundation of the relationship that I have with my wife is my relationship to God and her relationship to God. It takes three to make a marriage; two or four produce chaos. The Israelite cannot worship the Lord while his wife worships Asherah, or Baal, and expect to be able to have any unity or purpose of direction. They are going in two different directions.

That is why Paul says in 2 Corinthians 6, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers. What fellowship has the temple of God with the temple of idols?" That is a very strong statement, and it is not intended to be offensive to people outside the family; it is simply a fact. When you get two such temples together, they are incompatible and the result is distress to both members of the relationship, not merely the Christian. This prohibition is a provision of love. The statement in 2 Corinthians, "Do not be unequally yoked with unbelievers," is drawn from a law taken right out of the Israelites' national life. The law of Moses prohibited them from linking together any two animals that had unequal gaits, such as a donkey and an ox, or an ox and a camel. It was a humane provision because the unequal gait would cause the yoke to chafe them both. A number of years ago

I was speaking to a group of college students on this subject and I made reference to that 2 Corinthians 6 passage, giving them the background to it. One student at the back of the room raised his hand and asked, "Is it all right to date a camel if you don't marry one?" But do you see what Paul is saying? God is trying to preserve both individuals in the relationship. The wife will see that her husband's allegiance is to the Lord and that if he follows his Lord through the years ahead, they will get farther and farther apart. This causes her distress because in the very area where she wants to share the most, at the deepest, spiritual, most intimate level of her life, she cannot, for he is going in another direction. So Malachi says you need to know what distress you are going to bring upon yourself and others if you marry an idolater.

God's plan is that one man and one woman be together, worshiping the same Lord, and that the man's headship be worked out under the headship of his Lord. As the ones responsible for the spiritual leadership in our homes, we men cannot do as we please. We cannot follow any direction we may feel we want to follow. We follow the Lord. We receive our instructions from him, and that qualifies us then to lead our wives, assuming that she also is tied into the same Lord and is willing to move in the same direction. That is what makes for unity. That is the basis of oneness in our relationship. We may be incompatible in any number of areas, but if we are one in Christ, then that relationship will go. Now that is where Malachi begins, with that foundational basis: as husbands and wives, our relationship with God comes first.

The second issue concerning the nature of marriage is found in verses 13 through 16

"And this is another thing you do; you cover the altar of the Lord with tears, with weeping and with groaning, because He no longer regards the offering or accepts it with favor from your hand. Yet you say, 'For what reason?' Because the Lord has been a witness between you and the wife of your youth, against whom you have dealt treacherously, though she is your companion and your wife by covenant. But not one has done so who has a remnant of the Spirit. And what did that one do while he was seeking a godly

offspring? Take heed then, to your spirit, and let no one deal treacherously against the wife of your youth. For I hate divorce," says the Lord, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the Lord of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

Even without seeing the specific problem, as you begin to read these words you sense that any faulty relationship with your wife is going to result in a faulty relationship with God. It works both ways. Not only does our relationship with God determine the sort of relationship we have with our wife, but if we are not doing what is right in terms of our wife's needs, it will affect our relationship with God. Malachi describes this as "weeping at the altar, and God does not hear". We know from other passages in the book of Malachi that this was a time of terrible economic distress for the Israelites. The economy was falling apart; an extended drought was destroying their crops. The Israelites were beseeching God at the altar to change that circumstance, but he did not hear them, because there was something wrong with their relationships with their wives. This is reminiscent of Peter's words, "Husbands.. live with your wives in an understanding way... so that your prayers may not be hindered." If we do not live according to the truth in our relationship with our partner, then it will hinder our relationship with God.

The specific issue dealt with here is divorce. God says in no uncertain terms, "I hate divorce." The term is "sending away." "I hate a sending away." And notice, he does not say, "I hate divorcees." There is a vast difference. It does not matter how much ruin may be in your past, God can set it all right. Even if you cannot go back into the past and set one thing straight, you can begin right now to change your own life, your own relationship with your partner. God does not say he hates you, but he does hate divorce. The phrase, "him who covers his garment with wrong" is an interesting symbol. In the marriage ceremony (and this is true to this day in the Near East), husbands covered their partner with a long cloak, their outer garment, as a symbol of putting their wives under their protection. He says you are, in effect, covering your partner with a bespattered garment, a filthy garment, a garment covered with wrong. That is, not only are you unfaithful to the wife that you have, and are untruthworthy in the present relationship that you are involved in, but any new relationship takes on that same unfaithful spirit. You are not really committed to making it go. Your attitude is, "Let's try it for awhile; if it doesn't work, we'll do something else." That is like covering your partner with a garment of hardness, which is actually the term used here.

This passage is interesting when seen in parallel with Jesus' words about divorce. Jesus was asked, "Why did Moses allow divorce?" He responded, "Because of the hardness of your heart." But that was not God's original intention. A divorce is an admission that at least one person in the relationship has a hard heart and will not respond to God. For in Christ there is every possibility for making any marriage go, no matter how ruined that marriage may appear. Any marriage can be put back together again by God's grace, if we are willing to commit ourselves to the principles that are given to us here.

Now what are these principles for maintaining a marriage? Malachi says a number of very profound things about the nature of the marriage relationship. The first thing he says is that we should look at our wives as the wife of our youth. My wife is the wife of my youth, and my companion. That term really does not need definition. You can almost intuitively sense what is conveyed by the phrase. Malachi is saying I should treat my wife as I treated her in the days when we were young. You married her then because she was attractive, youthful, energetic. She has put you through school, washed your dirty socks, cleaned your house, taken care of your children, and that is bound to have taken its toll on her appearance. And, by the way, you don't look a bit better yourself! But you need to think of her in terms of the wife of your youth. She is the wife of your youth, the one who attracted you in the very beginning. And she is still the wife of your youth. She has not changed. When you are attracted by someone outside the marriage relationship who appears more youthful and more attractive, you

are to stop and think, "That is the wife of my youth, that one back home." You need to cultivate the relationship as you did when she was young. There is an old adage, "Why chase the bus when you've already caught it?" That is one attitude we need to put away, once and for all because any love relationship has to be cultivated. As a matter of fact, any relationship has to be cultivated. A relationship that is taken for granted will always deteriorate. That is the trend, as a result of our fallen state. Isaiah says, "We are all like sheep; we go our own way." As fallen persons, our wills will separate us from our wives and everyone else around us unless we cultivate those relationships. So we need to cultivate our relationship with our wives as we did when she became the wife of your youth. And we are never to stop cultivating it, never stop doing the things that please her; we are to think of creative ways to let her know that we love her and care for her.

The second principle in maintaining your relationship with your wife is to "treat her as your companion." A companion is "one that you are joined to" -- your friend. Throughout the Old Testament a person's wife is referred to as his friend, whereas other women are referred to as strangers. The Bible makes a sharp distinction between the way you treat your wife and the way you treat every other woman in the world. Your wife is your friend; every other woman is a stranger. God is not saying you should be unfriendly and unkind and ungracious to other women; but there is a radical difference between the way you look at your wife and the way that you look at any other woman. It is your wife who is your companion. Your wife is the one with whom you share your most intimate thoughts. Your wife is the one from whom you receive counsel--not other women, regardless of how sensitive they may appear to be about your hurts and your problems. Your wife is your companion, the one you are linked to. Malachi says we are to look at our wives as our friend, our companion. She is the wife of my youth, and I need to cultivate that love relationship, never taking it for granted.

Malachi begins with that definition of love, but he does not leave it there, because love alone is not sufficient to keep a marriage together. We are fallen people, and love grows cold at times. So in verse 14 Malachi talks about a third element that is necessary in the home: a covenant relationship. She is your wife by covenant, and it is a covenant which God has witnessed. Proverbs 2 actually describes marriage as the covenant of God. When you took your wife as your partner, you actually made a covenant with her and with society. But more than that, it was a covenant with God himself, that you would live together for life, "For better or for worse. You cannot say, "Well, she's a lot worse than I took her for!" She is your wife by covenant. That was the word that you gave before God, that you would live with this partner for life, until death separates you. Now we are being told today that this contract is an invention of society and that it is very recent. That simply is not true. Marriage contracts go back into antiquity as far as we have any written records, clear back into the second millennium B.C. Before the time of Abraham there were marriage contracts. Abraham did not bash Sarah over the head with a club and drag her into a cave and cohabit with her; he married her by a contract. I have a number of facsimiles of such contracts in my possession. One sounds very much like our wedding ceremony, in that the man promises to live with his wife according to certain established laws and she promises the same thing; then down at the bottom, eight men, two women, two scribes and the king sign it. It is a contract. Society, even apart from God, recognizes that love alone is not enough. Sometimes the only thing that will keep a marriage together for a period of time is that contract. You have agreed (in the case of Christians) before God that you will love your partner until death separates you. It does not matter how unlovely she is. That is not the issue.

In one of his papers, Jack Crabtree very astutely points out that before marriage the dynamic that keeps a couple together is sexual abstinence; after marriage, it is the contract. You say those are harsh words, but that is the way we are. We are fallen people. Our love will grow cold. We get tired of struggling in a relationship and we will walk out, unless we recognize that we have contracted before God to live together for life. But it does not have to be a hard and harsh thing, because that marriage can be turned back into a thing of beauty, where love

actually does reign.

Look at verse 15. Here is the fourth principle. If you have a New American Standard Bible, look at the margin. There are two different ways to translate this, and I think the text is terribly confusing. I cannot, for the life of me, understand the translation that we have in the New American Standard, but the margin translates it this way:

"Did he not make one, although He had the remnant? And why one? He was seeking a godly offspring."

He is referring to creation, going back to the time when God brought the man and the woman together. God created only one. He did not create four wives, only one. "Did He not make one (for Adam), although he had the remnant of the Spirit?" He could have made any number of wives for Adam, but he did not; he made one. "And why one? He was seeking a godly offspring." If you go back to the creation story, God shows Adam his need in a very graphic way. Adam first recognizes that he is alone, and then God brings out all of the animals, and Adam names all of them in relation to himself. God was trying to demonstrate that there was no animal that could meet his needs. There were beasts that could bear his burdens, there were beasts that could provide food; but no beast or bird could be a helper to correspond to him, who would be his supporter and encourager and partner in life. He could find no individual like that in the animal world. So God created woman from Adam's side and brought her to him. And the man's response was, "This is what I've been looking for!" She becomes his helpmate, his helper who corresponds to him. The point is, God did not bring Eve to Adam and say, "Adam, try her out for a year and if you don't like her you can trade her in on a brunette model next year." No, he made one, just one, no alternates, no other models--just one. And he said, "Adam, this is your partner." Why? In order that there might be a godly offspring. God's intention is that one man and one woman be together for life, and the result of that relationship be children that love God.

Now, even in the best of Christian homes the children don't always love God. (It did not happen even in Adam and Eve's home!) Because children have a will of their own, and they choose against the Lord. But that is the climate we need to provide. It makes it much easier for children to respond to the grace of God when they see it operative in their parents' lives. They may not respond to God; that is their choice. But what a privilege it is to be raised in a home where mom and dad really love each other, and really care for each other, and are committed to each other. And out of that security a child can respond to the love of God. Ultimately, isn't that what we want for our children: godliness? Our primary concern is not that they make it in the world economically, intellectually or physically--but spiritually.

One of my favorite stories has to do with an actress, Ellen Terry, who once proposed marriage to George Bernard Shaw with the idea that they would bequeath to the nation a child who would have both her looks and his brains. His response, as you can imagine, was, "But what if the child has my looks and your brains?" We have no way of knowing what our children will be like. But that is not the problem. The issue is, do we want our children to move out from our home knowing and loving God? Malachi says this is God's intention: one man and one woman together for life, in a climate of love and security where their child can develop in the knowledge of God. That is the created order.

Then there is a final principle for maintaining a marriage which I think gathers all these other principles together. It is stated first in verse 15 and then in verse 16,

"So take heed to your spirit."

I believe Malachi is saying that the issue really has to be solved in the inner man, in the spirit. Faithfulness to

your wife is not merely an external thing. There are many men who are externally faithful to their wives, but internally unfaithful, internally uncommitted. They are living together, outwardly showing love, but inwardly unfaithful, thinking of other relationships, cultivating relationships with other women in their minds. So Malachi says, "Take heed to your spirit," which is the basis for any solid relationship with your wife. Your own thought life, what goes on in the inner man, is where it all begins. That is why in the New Testament, church leaders are described as "the husband of one wife". This does not mean he has only one wife at a time; it means he is a one-woman kind of man, the kind of person who, in the inner man, is faithful, true to his wife, who cultivates that relationship internally, who seeks that kind of union and commitment, who is committed to her. That is where it begins, and that is why Malachi says, "Take heed to your spirit."

I am convinced that if we, as men, will act according to these truths, we can revolutionize our homes. You notice that this passage is addressed to the men, as so many passages dealing with the home are. Occasionally a word is addressed to our wives, but the bulk of revelation is given to us. In the book of Hosea, this same issue was at hand, the women were not finding this kind of love in their homes, so they were looking for it outside their homes. They were the unfaithful ones, but Hosea says God is not going to judge the women; he is going to judge you men because you have failed to provide the sort of climate where your wives can feel secure. So the responsibility rests upon us.

Now, again, he is not talking about the past, the destruction we may have left behind us. That is all past, all forgiven and forgotten. He is talking about the present and the future. And if we are obedient to these principles, we can begin to change our homes, so that they are places of light, and the relationship that we have now is everything that God intends it to be. It does not matter how distorted our homes may be; God can set it right, if we, as men, will commit ourselves, by God's grace, to being this kind of man. Who would not want this kind of husband? And what woman could resist this kind of love and leadership? It would be very unusual indeed if she could. You say, "Well, you don't know how ruined my home is, how cold my wife is, how unresponsive she is!" Or the wife says, "It's too far down the road! I can't stand him any longer."

There is an interesting verse in Jeremiah 31, just before the section that deals with the New Covenant. Jeremiah says, "God is going to create a new thing in Israel." The term that he uses is a term that is found throughout the Old Testament only when God is the subject. It refers to the creation of something where nothing exists, for God can create something when there is nothing. "God is going to create a new thing in Israel, and (listen to this!) a woman shall woo a man." The term means to surround him, to just love him to pieces. Now he is talking about Israel, who is the faithless daughter. For a thousand years the Lord cultivated his relationship, he sought Israel, and she was unfaithful. Jeremiah says God is going to do something new. He is going to create a new thing. Where no love exists, this woman is going to turn and pursue the husband. Israel will begin to woo the Lord. And I am convinced the same thing is true of our homes. Your love may have grown completely cold, it may be dormant. But if we are obedient to these principles, and if we, as husbands, begin to see our wives as the wives of our youth, and love them as our companions, and cultivate that relationship, and give them the sort of security and love that they have the right to expect, our marriages can be restored. If we commit ourselves as we did on our marriage day, till death do us part, and by the grace of God begin to deal with our attitudes in the areas of the inner man that inveigh against faithfulness--if we do those things, then God will restore our love, and will restore the love of our wives. God will give back to us the light that we must have in our dwellings in the midst of all this darkness.

Father, we thank you that it is the Lord's mercies that we are not all consumed, because who of us can say we have faithfully and responsibly done the things you have told us to do in our homes as husbands and wives? But we thank you that your mercies are new every morning, that your

faithfulness is great, and that by the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ we can begin this morning to be the kind of men that you have called us to be, and to establish the kind of relationship that will produce godly offspring. We thank you that your strength is adequate for that, and that the past is to be forgotten and forgiven, that we are not responsible any longer for the sins of the past, having asked forgiveness. We are free from guilt and can concentrate on the present. We thank you for your strength and for your resources that make possible that sort of commitment. We submit ourselves to you this morning to that end, and thank you in Christ's name, Amen.

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