

Malachi began his book last week talking about the Lord's faithfulness. And he does that in order to set up a contrast between God and between Israel, between God's faithfulness and Israel's faithlessness. And what contrast that is! In fact, in our reading for this evening as well as the next two readings which we will have, we are given examples of just how Israel has been faithless to the Lord. And so our reading for this evening is the Lord rebuking Israel for their indifference towards him and for their coldness towards the things of God.

And so the first rebuke which we have here is given to the priests. It is given to the Levites, the spiritual leaders of Israel, those who were called to offer up the sacrifices, those who were called to take care of the temple, those who were called to teach the people. They had a very big responsibility. And because they had this big responsibility, they were responsible for making sure that everybody was going the right way. That's not what they were doing. They were also responsible, in this case, for causing Israel to go astray. Now, that doesn't excuse everybody else, as if they're the only ones who are at fault here. But it does show that, as the spiritual heads of Israel, the priests had a special responsibility, a special charge from the Lord in which they were failing. And I think, just as an aside here, those of us whom God has called to be heads today, even in the New Testament, should take note of this. Especially fathers or husbands, because we have a God-given influence on our families that may be far bigger than you realize. And so we should take that very seriously, because that's who God has called us to be.

But what exactly is the accusation? What is God charging these priests with? He says that they are taking away his honor. They are taking away his fear, causing people to worship him in the wrong way. Because, Christians, in the Bible God is very specific about how he wants to be worshiped. Biblical worship isn't just whatever we want it to be. God has told us exactly how he wants us to come to him. And if we don't come to him in that way, then we can't call it worship at all. But that's exactly what the priests were doing. They were causing the people to worship God in the wrong way, so that they were sinning in their worship. We might ask, "How? How were they causing them to sin?" By causing the people to despise God's name, by causing them to not take him very seriously, to be very careless, to be indifferent towards the things of God. But then the Bible says: "You say, 'How have we despised your name?'" How has this happened? By offering up polluted sacrifices, the Lord says. Polluted because they are not fit to worship God, because they are unworthy to be given to God. "But how have we polluted you?" they say. "By saying that the Lord's table may be despised." In other words, by offering up these blemished sacrifices. When they were offering up their animal sacrifices, they were bringing animals that were blind or lame or sick, the kind of animals they didn't have any use for. And they were giving those to God saying, "Well, it's not any good to us, but hey, we can at least still serve God at the same time, right? We'll give them to him! We'll hand them over to him." As if God didn't deserve the very best animals that they had, as if God didn't deserve something better than what they were giving. But even God says, "Go, take that to your governor! Go take that your ruler. Offer him a sacrifice like that. Offer him an animal like that. You think he's going to be impressed?" Or, to put it in our terms, if you gave a present to somebody that was complete garbage, how do you think they're going to feel? And you said, "This is how much I care about you!" But we say it's good enough for God, the priests say, to give him the leftovers. Give him the things that we don't want. Is it any wonder, then, that the people didn't take God seriously? Is it any wonder that they didn't fear him at all? "Oh that," the Lord says, "Oh that there were one among you who would shut the doors that you might not kindle fire on my altar!" It would be

better to just shut the doors and not have any sacrifices at all than to have a sacrifice like this! This, then, was the priests' sin, the thing that the Lord is rebuking them for, leading the people astray and causing them to sin in their worship.

Now, Christians, in the New Testament we no longer offer up animal sacrifices. That has been done away with. Christ has been sacrificed once for all, has shed his blood for us. There is no more need to shed any blood. But that does not mean that we don't offer up sacrifice. We offer up a greater sacrifice, something better, a spiritual sacrifice to the Lord. As we hear in Romans 12, verse 1, "I appeal to you, therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship." And we also hear in Hebrews chapter 13: "Through him, then," that is, Jesus, "let us continually offer up a sacrifice of praise to God, that is, the fruit of lips that acknowledge his name. Do not neglect to do good and to share what you have, for such sacrifices are pleasing to God." So in other words, every Christian still offers sacrifice, a spiritual sacrifice to God. Not to be forgiven. That's been taken care of by the blood of Christ. We are not sacrificing blood. But we are offering up as priests of God the spiritual sacrifices of prayer, of praise, of thanksgiving, and of good works, the things that God has called us to do because of what he has done for us in Jesus Christ.

But I have to ask you, then, regarding these spiritual sacrifices. Have we been polluted in the sacrifices we offer to God? Have we offered up to him that which is pure, that which is acceptable in his sight? You might say, how? How would it be polluted? How would it be corrupted in these spiritual sacrifices? Whenever we are attracted to the things of this world, whenever we live in a worldly way, we pollute our spiritual sacrifice. And unfortunately that happens to us in lots of different ways.

One example of that might be a carelessness or a half-heartedness in the things of God. Do you find yourself bored in your prayers? Do you find yourself wondering, could I be doing something else? Do I treat the things of God as a checklist, something that I check off, but now I can get to something else, to go on to the rest of the work of the day? When we do that, unfortunately, Christians, we are treating the things of God in a worldly way. Another example might be if we are cold or indifferent to the needs of our neighbor. If we are not paying attention to what the people around us need and yet think that we are still serving God at the same time. As John tells us, "He who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen." To not take care of our fellow men, especially our fellow Christians, means that we cannot serve God at the same time. Or one more example would be just living in a worldly way. Do we live one way on Sunday morning and a different way on Monday morning? Or maybe even worse, one way on Sunday morning and another way on Sunday afternoon? Do we turn towards those things which are of the world, so that we're constantly falling back into sin or even persisting in that sin? If we do so, Christians, how can we say that we are serving God? And in all of these things, if we are falling into worldliness, how can we say that God will accept our spiritual sacrifices? How can we say that God will listen to us when we don't listen to him?

But God says to us in verse 11 of our reading: "For from the rising of the sun to its setting, my name will be great among the nations, and 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." God will make his name great, Christians. And God will be worshiped in the way that he wants to be

worshipped, because he will make that name great. And he has done that, Christians, in his Son, Jesus Christ. And by his cross, he has been glorified, and God will glorify his name again. And it is Jesus Christ who gives us the Holy Spirit, the Spirit who sets our hearts on fire, who causes our hearts to burn within us whenever we hear the word of God; the same Spirit who warms us to the needs of others around us, especially those who are in the church, who warms us to true, living, Christian love; the Spirit who transforms us, who makes us different from what we were, so that we are not taken in by the things of this world, but are made pure and acceptable in the eyes of God; and the same Spirit, Christians, who prays in us and with us, causing us to say, "Abba, Father!" That is the gift which Christ has given to us, causing us to offer the incense of prayer and a pure offering to the Lord and makes us no longer indifferent or careless or cold to the things of God.

So Christians, if you find yourself struggling in your prayers, if you find yourself feeling kind of cold or indifferent towards these things, pray about it. Turn to the Lord. Ask for the gift of the Holy Spirit. Because he is the one who makes us new. He is the one who will renew us. And he is the one who hears our prayers. And God will answer that prayer. When we are caught up in the world, let us repent and turn towards the Lord, and he will forgive us in Jesus Christ.

Let us pray. Lord God, heavenly Father, you have given us your Son, Jesus Christ, who has given us your Holy Spirit. We pray that you would set our hearts on fire, making us no longer cold and indifferent, but offering up a pure sacrifice to you, the sacrifice of praise and thanksgiving, so that we may glorify you now and in eternity. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.