

Loved

Some claims amaze us. John Lennon declared *The Beatles* to be more popular than Jesus Christ. He also said the followers of Jesus were thick and ordinary, and that Christianity will disappear. Cassius Clay asserted he was the greatest boxer.

Some 2,400 years ago the Jews were told they were loved. They faced misery. Their country and Jerusalem were left in a mess by the invading armies of Nebuchadnezzar. Many people were taken away to Babylon. When they returned, decades later, it was back-breaking work they had to do. The city and temple needed to be rebuilt. And yet, in the face of this great hardship, God had a message for them. It was short and very sweet: "I have loved you."

Timely

It is with these words that God began his message to his people through Malachi (*Malachi 1.2*). What the people heard they needed to be told. Sadly their love for God was not what it should have been. Many kept up an outward show of love for God. But the reality was different. Their hearts were far from him.

Need

The people had two needs. God addressed both. First, there was the need to *remind* them of who they were. And secondly, they needed to *recognize* what they should do.

Who were they? They were a people loved by God. In other words they were special; indeed, very special.

How is that fact conveyed? God mentions Jacob and Esau. These boys were brothers. They were twins, the twin sons of Isaac. That being so, it would usually be expected they would be equal. But that was not the case. There was a fundamental difference. Jacob was loved; Esau was hated.

Hated

Many baulk at the word 'hate'. They think it harsh and inappropriate. Hence some say it means 'not loved as much as'. But that is not what God says. The word is used to

convey the idea that one of the boys, Esau, was rejected by God.

We should not imagine the rejection of Esau was unfair and unjustified. Far from it. The evidence is that Esau despised his position as first born. To satisfy his craving for a tasty meal he sold it away. In other words, he did not take seriously the duties God gave to him. He also put his needs and desires before the will of God.

Loved

When we read that God loved Jacob we are not to imagine he deserved what he received. Far from it. He was a schemer who duped his dad. He too acted selfishly. Yet he was loved by God.

The lesson to be learned from Jacob and Esau is that God is free to show favour to whom he wills. We often call this sovereign grace. It is grace because it is undeserved. And it is sovereign because there is no other reason for it than the free choice of God.

The reason for the choice is not given or explained. It is asserted and declared to be the reality. Such inexplicable love amazes us. It is meant to do just that. And it was meant to do that for the Jews who lived in Malachi's day. They needed

to be reminded who they were. God's people. A people freely and sovereignly chosen by him. Chosen, that is, to be his people. This fact they were to remember. And that fact God's people are called to remember in every generation.

Underlined

The reality of their status as God's loved ones is emphasised. Edom, a nation made up of the descendants of Esau, is mentioned (*Malachi 1 3-5*). Three facts are given. *First*, the hill country occupied by the Edomites had been laid waste (*verse 3*). In other words God had already shown he was displeased with them. Why? Because they neither respected nor loved him. *Secondly*, should the Edomites try to rebuild the ruins, God would destroy their work once more (*verse 4*). And thirdly, God's people would see this and talk about how the greatness of God's power is not just seen among his people. It is also seen in the world.

Recognise

God does not just call his people to remember who they are. He also challenges them to recognise what they are to be. How is this done in Malachi chapter 1?

In verse 6 God speaks of a 'father' and a 'master'. He invites his people to think about how each is treated.

A father is honoured by his son. And a master is feared by his servant. These are responses we observe in everyday life. Generally speaking a son admires, prizes and respects his father. And likewise, in the world of work, a servant seeks to do his master's will. He knows his duty is to obey and serve.

What is seen in the world is to be seen in the church. This is the lesson God wants his people to take to heart. But things are not always what they ought to be. Some members of the church forget who they are and fail to be what they are called to be.

Priests

The rot can be seen among leaders. It was in Malachi's day. Those responsible for worship failed to ensure the revealed will of God was kept. In fact they turned a blind eye to wrong doing and set a bad example themselves (*see verses 6-8*). What did these failures reveal? The word from God is explicit. The behaviour of the priests showed they despised God. Instead of honouring him they were indifferent to him.

Yes, they put on a show. They did many of the things expected of them but they did not do them as they were called to do. It was not God's will that mattered but their own. It

was not self-denial but selfishness they demonstrated.

People

The people were no better, as verse 14 indicates. With the wrongdoing of the priests exposed in verses 6-13 (and again in chapter 2) it is possible to miss the force of verse 14. Yes, the leaders may be to the fore but we are not to imagine they were the only ones who did wrong. The duplicity and selfishness of the people is hinted at in verse 14. Their responsibility was to bring animals without defect for sacrifice. Although they promised to do things properly, they chose to do otherwise.

It is a sad fact of church life that many who profess love for God and Christ Jesus may fail to show it. Both leaders and people sometimes fall short. Clearly leaders are answerable for failing to lead as they should, and thus for leading people astray. But those led are responsible for themselves. Their calling is to walk humbly with the Lord their God. That entails obedience to his revealed will.

Privilege

The privilege of every believer is to seek to know God and his will for them. The eternal life they are called to enjoy is not just never ending. It is primarily fellowship. It is a

personal relationship - an intimate relationship with the living God. How do we know this? We learn it from the prayer Jesus offered shortly before his betrayal, trials and death. Christ acknowledges why God sent him. It was to give eternal life to those given to him by God (*John 17.2*). He then immediately defines eternal life. What is it? "This is eternal life", says Jesus as he prays, "that they may know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (*John 17.3*).

Know

The key word is 'know'. It is a word that speaks of personal relationship. Every believer is called to be personally acquainted with God and Jesus Christ. Their lives are marked out as different. Unlike others they enjoy the first-fruits of life abundant here on earth. And they know God has the fullness of such abundant life in store for them after death and the judgment on the last day.

Since the earliest of days God's people have known these things. A problem that has arisen among them from time to time is forgetfulness. It showed itself in a big way in the days of Malachi. That was tragic, not just because it was wrong. It also came so soon after a severe period of correction and discipline. The exile in Babylon was due to their

unfaithfulness in days past. Sadly soon after their return to their homeland and the city of Jerusalem they showed signs of slipping backwards into their old ways. That was why God used Malachi to expose their sin and to call them to change their ways.

Invitation

The God who surprises his people by reminding them of his everlasting love for them, also invites them to see that he will continue to be gracious to the undeserving who ask for favour. In Malachi 1 verse 9 the prophet urges the people to ask God to show them favour. He also reminds them he promises to be gracious.

God's love is amazing. It never ceases to astound us.