

Our Contributors.

God's Love and Man's Ingratitude. *

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I have loved you, saith the Lord; yet ye say: Wherein hast thou loved us? Malachi 1:2.

Paul in Ephesians speaks of the love of Christ as passing knowledge. Many illustrations of this great truth might be given, but there is one mentioned by the prophet Micah and profusely illustrated by Malachi. It is where Micah, speaking of the Lord, says: He will plead with his people—plead when he might command; plead with rebellious and ungrateful men, when he might utterly destroy them with a word! What God did then, he still does now with everyone of us. If the child will not turn from his evil way, we punish him, if a man will not forsake his sin, our Heavenly Father, being righteous, must punish the transgressor. But even then the punishment is tempered with mercy. He does not forget He is a father, and that he has revealed himself to men, as "delighting in mercy." Even whilst he strikes he pleads: "Why should ye be stricken anymore." Is. 1:15. As Paul says: "As though God did beseech you by us, we pray you in Christ's stead, be ye reconciled to God."

And the pleading is not in vain, for not seldom the hard heart of the sinner is softened by a view of the tender love of the Father. Like the prodigal "he comes to himself," the venturesome, deeply-repentant, and asks for a forgiveness which is never refused. But too often, also there is no repentance; the sinner revolts more and more. This was the case with the Israelites when God pleaded with them by his servant Malachi, the last of the Old Testament prophets.

Malachi's charge is first of all against the ministers of The Temple, the Levites. They should have kept alive the knowledge of God among the people, and then fulfilled the duties of ambassadors of God; but they seem to have lost all piety, and to have performed their Temple duties without zeal or enthusiasm, or even with weariness and disgust. Like priests, like people! The laity had caught the contagion of priestly indifference for when, according to custom, they brought the first fruits of the harvest to the Temple, they selected, not the best, as God's law required them to do, but the worst. They offered polluted head upon the altar and gave blind, lame or sick lambs and goats for sacrifices. Private life is always afflicted for the worst by ungodliness, therefore we find that divorces for insufficient cause were a daily occurrence, and many a "wife of youth," unjustly cast out, covered the altar of the Lord with tears. Marriages with "daughters of strange Gods," i.e. heathen girls, were common and are described by the prophet as a "profanation of the holiness of the Lord." Many of the people gave absolutely nothing to keep up ordinances, not even damaged grain, rancid oil, or crippled cattle, and God, true to his threatenings as he is to his promises, punished this avarice with seasons of barrenness. "Ye looked for much and behold it came to little, and when ye brought it home behold! I did blow upon it."

All these sins exist in modern times, just as they did then. Customs, manners, politics, all things change, but the heart of man is the same to-day as it was then, "deceitful above all

things and desperately wicked." Malachi's message, with but slight modifications, might have been addressed to many in our own day; and it is so addressed for the Bible is not a book for any special age. It is a book for all ages. Its morality is as unchangeable as God, its author.

There may be found in nominally christian lands the formalism of the Pharisee, the preference for ceremonial over heart reformation, the tendency to destroy the holiness of the marriage bond by too easy divorces, the profanation of the holiness of the Lord by marriages of goodly to ungodly, always resulting disastrously; the giving to the Lord for the advancement of his kingdom on the earth, and for works of charity and mercy, a mere fraction of income—often nothing, often the worst instead of the best.

This can only be remedied by making men sensible of God's love to them. When we appreciate that love, even at a small part of its value, we cannot otherwise than wish to make a return to God by loving service—"labor of love" Paul calls it. Therefore the Lord Jehovah says to us to-day, what he says to the Jews of Malachi's time, *I have loved you*. Now, if the scriptures had been written in English some might say: This love is a thing of the past. It is something dead and gone. God has loved us, but now loves us no more. But the Hebrew term here bears a larger meaning. It is one of continued and enduring action. It is not only "I have loved you," but also "I do love you." All the past and all the present are there; Man and Eternity, hand in hand. As it has been well said: "God's love is eternal, and it is immediate; it is from everlasting and yet it always seems to be new-born. This loving tenderness is from everlasting, and his compassions are new every morning." yet ye say. *Wherein hast thou loved us.*

Such is the answer of Israel to God's pleading and to God's declaration of love! To understand fully the black ingratitude of such an answer, to see clearly to what a low moral pitch that people had fallen, let us put the words into the mouth of one of our own children, a son or daughter for whom father and mother have worked for years, whom they have carefully shielded from possible harm, whom they have watched anxiously over in times of sickness, for whom they have denied themselves even some of the necessities of life; and when the old, feeble, broken-down parents come to those children, now men and women, and ask for some little return; when they say to them, Remember how I loved you, they answered, wherein have you loved us? Well, if they cannot see *wherein*, it is useless for the old people to urge them any farther. Their heart must be dead; their conscience seared, but the helpless ones seek the work-house, or the cold charge of strangers, for sharper than a serpent's tooth is such ingratitude! and the looker-on could not but say: "let the course of the Almighty abide upon those who thus wilfully ignore past benefits received. Would not this be a righteous sentence? But God, more merciful, more long-suffering, more patient than ever—God who could very well do without man's service or man's love—God still pleads, not willing that any should perish!

Is it not strange to see how clearly we can appreciate the wickedness of ingratitude to men, and yet be so blind to our own ingratitude to God. For in the sulky answer of

the Jews to God, "Wherein hast thou loved us?" we may recognize our own experience. We forget God's favours because they are so numerous. The very fact of their being rendered to us every morning ought to make the memory of them eternal to us. Instead, it often seems to cause the record to be disregarded, if not altogether obliterated. We get so accustomed to receive certain blessings from God that it seems to us as if we had a right to their succession. Take a common enough illustration in life. How often we may have heard in harvest time farmers—not ungodly men by any means, say: Why does God allow it to rain day after day when that will mean ruin to our crop? Would he not answer, if it came to that: What right have we in the sun. Yet here is the sun shining over the fields of the unjust as well as over the fields of the just. Ah! let us have grateful hearts, even if all in this world is not to our liking, God knows best what is best, so never let our thankfulness fall to decay. Every true christian should keep ever green the memory of God's kindness just as we should also not forget kindness received from our parents or friends. Every kind action should be to us as a precious plant carefully cherished, kept in the heart and not allowed to die.

Now, as we said, it is not to Israel only, it is also to us that the Lord to-day says: *I have loved you*. It is not possible that any one here would venture to give the lie to a life's experience of God's goodness, by replying like Israel: *wherein hast thou loved us?* There is more information abroad to-day than there was in Malachi's time. The Christian who could not see special reasons for loving God, in return for what he is doing daily for his church on earth, would only confess his ignorance. God loved the Church, for His son gave Himself for her, lived and died and rose again that all his followers might find an example in His life, might through Him triumph over death, and rise again at the last day. In our time God has given his church great prosperity. No persecution rages in Christian lands. No one can forbid us the possession or study of God's blessed word, nor punish us for trying to make it the rule of our life. The Gospel is preached to the poor; the word of God is within the reach of all, we know that salvation is free. Add to these blessings the good that God does for each one of us, day by day and we would be blind indeed if we did not see that God has loved us.

You are a Christian. I suppose you call God your Father in Heaven. Show them what honour you render to that kind father. Do you love him? and loving him, do you obey him? Do you give him the labour of love of which it is written that he is not unmindful? Do you honour his cause with the first fruits of your labour, glad to give him your best, to Him who to save you, gave His best? His only begotten Son. Or do you serve self, the world or anything or any body else first, or let your Father have only what may be left, when all else have been served? I ask because some do this who yet call God, father! Surely they cannot have understood the love of God. If they had, not only what they have, but what they are—they themselves would be given to that Father in Heaven, a living sacrifice.

But perhaps there is some one here who does not profess to be a Christian believer. God is yet only a Master, a Ruler for Him? perhaps he thinks a despot. Well, if this is your theory God asks you: Where is my fear, Thus the Lord meets men on their own ground. We cannot escape God by inventing a new theory. Whatever opinion we may hold of God, God answers: Be it so, if