

# OpenTheo

## October 6th: Malachi 2 & Matthew 25:1-30

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A people riddled with infidelity. The Parable of the Talents.

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## Transcript

Malachi chapter 2. And now, O priests, this command is for you. If you will not listen, if you will not take it to heart to give honor to my name, says the Lord of hosts, then I will send the curse upon you, and I will curse your blessings. Indeed, I have already cursed them, because you do not lay it to heart.

Behold, I will rebuke your offspring, and spread dung on your faces, the dung of your offerings, and you shall be taken away with it. So shall you know that I have sent this command to you, that my covenant with Levi may stand, says the Lord of hosts. My covenant with him was one of life and peace, and I gave them to him.

It was a covenant of fear, and he feared me. He stood in awe of my name. True instruction was in his mouth, and no wrong was found on his lips.

He walked with me in peace and uprightness, and he turned many from iniquity. For the lips of a priest should guard knowledge, and my people should seek instruction from his mouth, for he is the messenger of the Lord of hosts. But you have turned aside from the way.

You have caused many to stumble by your instruction. You have corrupted the covenant of Levi, says the Lord of hosts, and so I make you despised and abased before all the people, inasmuch as you do not keep my ways, but show partiality in your instruction. Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers? Judah has been faithless, and abomination has been committed in Israel and in Jerusalem.

For Judah has profaned the sanctuary of the Lord which he loves, and has married the daughter of a foreign God. May the Lord cut off from the tents of Jacob any descendant of the man who does this, who brings an offering to the Lord of hosts. And the second thing you do, you cover the Lord's altar with tears, with weeping and groaning, because he no longer regards the offering, or accepts it with favour from your hand.

But you say, why does he not? Because the Lord was witness between you and the wife of your youth, to whom you have been faithless, though she is your companion, and your wife by covenant. Did he not make them one, with a portion of the spirit in their union? And what was the one God seeking? Godly offspring. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth.

For the man who does not love his wife, but divorces her, says the Lord, the God of Israel, covers his garment with violence, says the Lord of hosts. So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless. You have wearied the Lord with your words.

But you say, how have we wearied him? By saying, everyone who does evil is good in the sight of the Lord, and he delights in them, or by asking, where is the God of justice? The book of Malachi has a series of six disputes between the Lord and his people, in which he puts into words their beliefs and their negative attitudes towards him. The first concern their doubting of his love, the second which began in verse 6 of chapter 1, continues to the end of chapter 2 verse 9. It especially focuses on the priests, and the ways in which they are dishonouring the Lord by their disregard for his sacrifices. As a consequence, the Lord says that they would be better off if someone just closed down the temple and its sacrifices, rather than continuing to bring offerings that manifest their lack of respect for him.

The priests are held the most culpable for the situation, as they are the ones who are responsible to teach the people and to guard the house and its holiness, and they are clearly failing in both. The Lord gives a command to the priests, the content of which is debated by commentators, as it isn't entirely clear to what it refers. The command should most likely be understood as one to listen to the Lord and to honour his name, with the command being presented in the conditional form of a curse or judgement.

If they will fail, or rather continue to fail in this respect, they will continue to know the Lord's judgement upon them. Anthony Pettison mentions Michael Fishbane's intriguing argument that, in saying that the Lord would curse their blessings, the Lord is saying

that the blessing that the priests would deliver over the people would carry the force of a curse. That blessing is given in Numbers chapter 6 verses 22-27.

The Lord spoke to Moses saying, Speak to Aaron and his sons, saying, Thus you shall bless the people of Israel. You shall say to them, The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you.

The Lord lift up his countenance upon you and give you peace. So shall they put my name upon the people of Israel, and I will bless them. Fishbane suggests that in puns, inversions and reversals, the Lord is giving the priests measure for measure.

Now their blessings, far from leading to the face of the Lord shining and the lifting up of his countenance upon them, would instead lead to their faces being covered with the filthy refuse of their unworthy sacrifices to him and their being removed with it from his presence. The purpose of the command that the Lord gives to the priests is to sustain the covenant with Levi, the character of which is described in verses 5-7. There aren't many references to a covenant with Levi in the scriptures.

The tribe of Levi was initially cursed with scattering among Israel by Jacob in his blessing of the tribes in Genesis chapter 49. However that curse had later been transformed into a blessing. The violent zeal of Levi displayed in Exodus chapter 32 when they executed the Lord's wrath upon their Israelite brethren following the sin with the golden calf, led to their being set apart for the priesthood and the service of the house of the Lord.

Their uncompromising zeal and their fear of the Lord made them fitting people for the task. As Moses said in his blessing of Levi in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verses 8-11 As a result of their faithfulness, while still scattered among the tribes, they were scattered as those whose inheritance was the service of the Lord himself. A further historical event that confirmed the setting apart of the tribe of Levi and of a more particular line of it for the high priesthood was Phinehas' zealous action that stopped the plague where, in Numbers chapter 25, he thrust a spear through a leading Israelite and the Midianite woman with whom he was having relations.

They were part of Israel's idolatrous and sexually debauched yoking of themselves to bail or peel. By this action, Phinehas maintained the Lord's fear among the people and upheld his honour. He thereby protected the whole company of the people who otherwise would have suffered the full wrath of the Lord himself.

The Lord's response to the action of Phinehas is described in verses 10-13 of that chapter. And the Lord said to Moses, Phinehas, the son of Eleazar, son of Aaron the priest, has turned back my wrath from the people of Israel, in that he was jealous with my jealousy among them, so that I did not consume the people of Israel in my jealousy. Therefore say, Behold, I give to him my covenant of peace, and it shall be to him and to his descendants after him the covenant of a perpetual priesthood, because he was

jealous for his God and made atonement for the people of Israel.

The event is also recalled in Psalm 106 verses 28-31. Then they yoked themselves to the bail or peel, and ate the sacrifices offered to the dead. They provoked the Lord to anger with their deeds, and a plague broke out among them.

Then Phinehas stood up and intervened, and the plague was stayed, and that was counted to him as righteousness from generation to generation forever. As Ray Clendenin observes, Deuteronomy chapter 10 verses 8-9 seems to connect the action of Phinehas with the setting apart of Levi, which in the context occurs after such events as the death of Aaron. At that time the Lord set apart the tribe of Levi to carry the Ark of the Covenant of the Lord, to stand before the Lord to minister to him and to bless in his name to this day.

Therefore Levi has no portion or inheritance with his brothers. The Lord is his inheritance, as the Lord your God said to him. Presumably we should see the actions of Phinehas as confirming the prior setting apart of Levi.

Phinehas typifies the zeal and fear of the Lord that animated the Levites when they were living up to their divine charge. He was jealous for the Lord's honour, concerned to prevent any assault upon it. For this reason his line would be appointed to the high priesthood, a priesthood characterized by the traits that Phinehas exemplified would carefully instruct the people in the truth of the Lord.

They would take the people's sin seriously and powerfully model in their own behavior the fear of the Lord. Such a priesthood would be effective in turning the people away from sin. However a priesthood that had become dull to the Lord's holiness would have a destructive effect upon the entire people, leading many astray by their example.

The Lord here condemns the priests for corrupting the Covenant of Levi when so many of their faithful ancestors had once been so jealous for his honour. For their dishonouring of the Lord they will themselves be despised and abased before the people. Apart from anything else, where the servants of the Lord dishonour him, they should not be surprised if they themselves are dishonoured.

By teaching the people to dishonour their master, the priests ironically denigrated their own office. By describing the ideal priest as the messenger of the Lord of hosts, in addition to reminding us of Malachi's own name, which means my messenger, the Lord is also preparing us for the figure of the purifying messenger at the beginning of the next chapter. The third dispute starts in verse 10 and runs until verse 16.

This is an especially difficult section to translate and interpret, especially in verses 15 and 16, which have provoked no end of different readings. The section opens with three questions, the first two setting up the third. The unity of the people is known in the

oneness of God.

Since there is one God, his people must also be one. The apostle Paul seems to use a similar logic to make his case in Galatians chapter 3. The reference to having one father could conceivably concern Abrahamic fatherhood, which was often a matter of dispute in the Gospels and the Pauline epistles. However, without a thicker concept of what it means to be the sons and daughters of Abraham, such as Paul develops in the book of Romans, such a claim to common fatherhood in this context might be vulnerable to the challenge that Esau, and hence the nation of Edom, are sons of Abraham too.

That said, considering that Abrahamic fatherhood is so often appealed to in scripture in a manner that seems to presume a more stipulated sense that would exclude such people as the Edomites, I don't think that this possibility can be so lightly dismissed. Nevertheless, it is more likely that this is a reference to the Lord's fatherhood, in terms of which Israel could be spoken of as his firstborn son. The Lord had also created them, not merely in the more general sense shared by the entire creation – although maybe that's primarily what is in view here – but also, more particularly, as a people that have been fashioned for his own purposes.

Given the unity of the people as brothers and sisters relative to the fatherhood of the Lord and fellow creatures of the Almighty relative to his creative work, their unfaithfulness to each other, to the Lord and to their wives, is especially egregious, a violation of covenant expectations. To act against your brother is also indirectly an affront to your common father. The marriage to the daughter of a foreign god is a second charge of unfaithfulness levelled against the people.

The identity of this daughter of a foreign god is debated by commentators. Some argue that it might be a reference to a pagan deity. But commentators far more typically understand it to concern a woman among a people that worships a foreign god.

The concern is much less that the woman is a foreigner than that she is a worshipper of a god other than the Lord. Intermarriage was long an issue in Israel and most notably was a prominent issue for Ezra and Nehemiah who were likely living near to the time of Malachi's prophecy. Intermarriage and idolatry were closely associated issues as marriage to pagan women led to the worship of foreign gods and also vice versa.

As the Lord warned Israel in Exodus chapter 34 verses 12 to 16 Intermarriage with idolatrous women famously led to the failure of King Solomon whom Nehemiah presented to the people as a cautionary example. In Solomon's case love for foreign women led to idolatry. One of the effects of such intermarriage was the syncretistic intermarriage of the worship of the Lord with the worship of idols or the rise of polytheistic practices.

In verse 12 Malachi calls upon the Lord to condemn all who were unfaithful in such a

manner. The next charge of unfaithfulness begins with the people's mourning over the Lord's failure to heed their offerings, presumably manifested in his covenant curses afflicting them despite their sacrifices. The reason for the Lord's disregard for their offerings is given in the verses that follow.

They had been unfaithful to their wives, dishonouring the marriage covenant between them and their wives even though it was a covenant witnessed by the Lord in which they had presumably made vows to each other before him and even in his name. Sins against the Lord and sins against our neighbours are intertwined in many ways and in few more so than in the breaking of the marital covenant. The wife is described as the man's companion, someone joined to him in the closest affinity, and also as his wife by covenant, someone bound to him in the most solemn union.

Perhaps the other description of the wife as the wife of your youth serves to highlight the betrayal that such unfaithfulness involves. Verses 15 and 16 are fiendishly difficult to translate and interpret, even if we can get a general gist of what the section is saying from verse 14. Many commentators throw up their hands and declare the verses to be completely unintelligible.

Doubtless they are some of the toughest verses in the whole Old Testament to translate, which any cursory examination of different translations of them will support. Clendenin lists some of the questions that must be answered concerning the interpretation of verse 15 alone. He writes Is one, in the first clause, the subject or object, or predicate adjective of did make? Does it refer back to one in verse 10? If it is the subject, what is the understood object? Perhaps it, her or them? Does one refer to God, or to Adam or Abraham, especially if one father in verse 10 refers to one of these? Or to the marital relationship of verse 14, perhaps alluding to Genesis chapter 2 verse 24? Or to the one guilty of unfaithfulness, noting similarities to the curse in verse 12, especially to the man who does it? Or is it pronominal with not, with the sense no one? If one is the object, who is the understood subject of the verb? After raising about a couple of dozen further questions that are raised by verse 15 alone, Clendenin concludes combinations of answers to these many questions, even more interpretations result from various proposals for amending the verse.

This doesn't mean that we are without considerations that could provide a limited degree of assistance. Some of the factors that might help us to weigh the likelihood of different readings are connections within the immediate context, for instance back to the logic of the one in verse 10. We might also see some allusion back to the story of Genesis chapter 2 and the creation of mankind.

A more direct control upon our reading is provided by the immediately surrounding verses and the importance of retaining the integrity of the argument. As Clendenin remarks, whatever we come up with in our interpretation of these verses, it must

naturally lead to the conclusion, so guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless. His rendering of the first half of the verse is very attractive.

Don't you know that God made you one with your wives, and despite of your treachery in divorcing your wives, there is still a remnant of that spiritual bond? And what is the purpose of that oneness? It is to produce godly offspring with God's help. Bearing children and raising them in the fear and the admonition of the Lord is a primary purpose of marriage. It is also something that manifests the unity of the couple, as the children that they bear are living expressions of their one flesh union.

The Lord's great desire for godly offspring might also make us think of a verse like Genesis chapter 18 verse 19, as the Lord speaks concerning his choice of Abraham. The divine purpose in the marriage bond and the enduring reality of the spirit forged bond between husband and wife gives rise to the Lord's warning to husbands to guard themselves in their spirit. Faithlessness to the wives of their youth may arise primarily from a careless disregard and inattention to the dangerous passions that lurk within their own hearts.

To pursue faithfulness, they must learn to master their own spirits. Especially in older translations, the first half of verse 16 is read as an expression of the Lord's own hatred for divorce. In the King James version, for instance, The result of this reading seems to be rather convoluted.

The reading of something like the ESV is probably much closer to the mark. The reference then is not to the Lord's hatred for divorce, but rather to the man who hates his wife and as a result divorces her. Among other things, this would help us to understand why it's the third person masculine singular verb that's used at this point.

If it were the Lord expressing his own hatred for divorce, then we would expect a first person singular verb. The verse then talks about the full ramifications of the actions of the man who divorces his wife out of mere hatred for her. He covers his garment with violence.

He becomes clothed, as it were, with the cruelty of his actions towards her. The charge given at the end of verse 15 is nearly repeated at the end of verse 16. So guard yourselves in your spirit and do not be faithless.

The chapter ends with the start of a fourth dispute. Once again, the Lord puts words in the mouths of his people, expressing their attitudes and their beliefs concerning him. They doubt the Lord's justice, they see the wicked prospering, and they believe that the Lord must be morally indifferent.

However, such beliefs verge on a sort of atheism, a denial that God is a just God who acts within the world according to his justice. This dispute will be continued in the verses

that follow. A question to consider.

Why is zeal such an important trait in the priests? Here is the bridegroom. Come out to meet him. Then all those virgins rose and trimmed their lamps, and the foolish said to the wise, give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.

But the wise answered, saying, since there will not be enough for us and for you, go rather to the dealers and buy for yourselves. And while they were going to buy, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went in with him to the marriage feast, and the door was shut. Afterward the other virgins came also, saying, Lord, Lord, open to us.

But he answered, Truly I say to you, I do not know you. Watch therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. For it will be like a man going on a journey, who called his servants and entrusted to them his property, to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his He who had received the five talents went at once and traded with them, and he made five talents more.

So also he who had the two talents made two talents more. But he who had received the one talent went and dug in the ground and hid his master's money. Now after a long time the master of those servants came and settled accounts with them.

And he who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five talents more, saying, Master, you delivered to me five talents. Here I have made five talents more. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.

And he also who had the two talents came forward, saying, Master, you delivered to me two talents. Here I have made two talents more. His master said to him, Well done, good and faithful servant.

You have been faithful over a little. I will set you over much. Enter into the joy of your master.

He also who had received the one talent came forward, saying, Master, I knew you to be a hard man, reaping where you did not sow and gathering where you scattered no seed. So I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here, you have what is yours.

But his master answered him, You wicked and slothful servant, you knew that I reap where I have not sown and gather where I have scattered no seed? Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and at my coming I should have received what was my own with interest. So take the talent from him and give it to him who has the ten talents. For to everyone who has will more be given.



And he will have an abundance. But from the one who has not, even what he has will be taken away. And cast the worthless servant into the outer darkness.

In that place there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth. Matthew chapter 25 contains three great judgment scenes. The first one is the parable of the ten virgins.

Why virgins? Well, maybe because this is a marital event. The bridegroom is coming. He's going to return for his bride.

And the virgins would be associated with the bride. They would be the sort of bridesmaid. And here I think they symbolize those associated with the bride of Jerusalem.

And the five and five pattern continues the one taken and another left pattern that immediately precedes it. It underlines the binary division that Matthew often draws our attention to. Why are there ten of them? Perhaps we could think of it in terms of ten lampstands of Solomon's temple.

There's five on the right, there's five on the left. And the virgins represent the bridal character of the people which is represented by the temple itself. They bear their lamps out to meet the bridegroom as a sort of unveiling of the bridal glory within the temple.

It's a presentation of that glory to the bridegroom who's arrived. It might be connected also with the previous parable of the wise and faithful servant which might be the faithful high priest who has to act within the house of his master. And there's a cry at midnight and there's a shut door that reminds us of Passover.

It's the event where God delivers his people in the middle of the night and there's this terrible judgment upon those who are not faithful. And those who are left outside of the door suffer a terrible fate whereas those within the house who are safe are blessed. We should also have in mind Exodus chapter 27 verses 20 to 21.

Keeping oil for the lamps was the continual duty of the Israelites and it was like the fourth day associated with the heavenly lights but paralleled with the first day when the lampstand itself was fashioned. The lamp going out was associated with loss of vision, prophetic and the eyes of judgment and we've seen this in 1st Samuel chapter 3 verses 1 to 3. That parallelism between the eyes of the high priest, the light of the word of the Lord being heard and then also the lamp in the temple. Oil is light bearing liquid and it's associated with anointing which is associated in turn with light bearing in places like Zechariah chapter 4 and elsewhere in scripture we see oil associated with the spirit who produces faith in us which prepares the people of God to bear God's light.

You might also think about the contrast between the characters that's drawn here. We should pay attention to the adjectives that are used. It's faithful and wise versus wicked, wise versus foolish, faithful versus wicked and slothful.

Each description accents something different about the aspects of character that we should be attending to. It's not just good and bad, it's wise and foolish. It's people who are prepared, people who are ready and people who are not, people who have gotten the resources that they need in the time for the judgment and those who are taken by surprise and unawares and unprepared.

The foolish versus wise opposition should also be explored deeper. We can see that in places like Proverbs chapter 9 with the contrast between the woman folly and lady wisdom. Here we can also maybe think back to the wise and foolish builders in the Sermon on the Mount and the way that many of the same themes come up there, the way that they will be inspected.

I never knew you for those who say Lord, Lord, we did all these things in your name and yet they are workers of wickedness. Here being prepared for Christ requires faithfulness, diligence, vigilance but also wisdom. The wise person sees what lies ahead and makes provision and preparation for it and this is one of the things that the disciples of Christ are challenged to do by this parable.

They do not know what time the Lord will return in judgment upon them and so they must be prepared at all times, they must be ready to leave at a moment and that will be a matter of keeping their lamps prepared, tending the lamp of the spirit within them. This could be connected to the life of the church more directly by recognising that Christians are lamps and the church is a lampstand. This is one of the significances of the tongues of flame at Pentecost and the vision that we see in Revelation chapter 1. We have been anointed with the oil of the spirit and set alight by that spirit.

With tongues of flame we are burning as a candlestick, as a lampstand, as individual lamps within the temple of God and it's important that we tend to the life of the spirit within us. We do not quench the Holy Spirit, we seek to tend the flame of the spirit by regularly returning to the replenishing oil of the word and the sacraments. The next parable is a story of a man who departs for a long journey and he entrusts a great deal of his property to his servants.

Talent should not be presumed to mean talents in the sense that we often use that term. We often think of talents in terms of our skills and abilities and it's not unrelated to that but that's not what the term means here. It's a large sum of money and it's to be used for trade.

They seem to be given these gifts of talents on the basis of their ability. The more competent and able the more will be entrusted to their hands and God-given responsibilities and opportunities for service are important and we must make the most of these. That's one of the points of this parable.

The importance is to be found ready for judgment. The time of testing will reveal the

work of people. This is something that's discussed on various occasions within the New Testament where we see that people who are unfaithful find that their work in the day of testing is destroyed and things for which they may have been responsible fall to other more able and responsible and faithful parties.

Those who are faithful share in the joy of their master and we should remember a talent is an immense sum of money. Two talents might be an entire lifetime's wages for a regular worker. A modern equivalent would be something maybe two or three million dollars.

This man is leaving an immense treasure in the hands of his servants and expecting them to have something to show for it at the other end. He's expecting them to prove themselves faithful and diligent and capable of using his resources well. Luke's parable is different.

It's a story of a returning king. The king leaves these great treasures with people and then goes off for a long journey where he defeats people who were not willing to be reigned over by him and then he returns having gained the kingdom and then gives these gifts to his faithful servants. Luke also has an equal distribution at the beginning but very different results from their trading.

Matthew has different distribution at the outset. When the man in Matthew's parable returns it's after a long time. For some this suggests that this parable relates not to AD 70 but to the end of all things.

I'm not sure that's the case though. The extra responsibility seems to be within this world and the long time could relate to the 40 years. 40 years can be a very long time to live through especially when you might be spending almost the entirety of your life waiting for this thing to be fulfilled.

Here we might see parallels between the faithful servants and the faithful and wise servant of chapter 24 verse 45. The unfaithful servant, the final servant however, is lazy and indolent. He doesn't think that there's anything personally that he has to gain from acting as a faithful steward of his master's wealth.

He ventures nothing. He is merely concerned not to lose what has been entrusted to him and importantly his behaviour was based upon a particular perception of his master. He sees his master as a hard man, a man who is more concerned with judgment, not a generous master, a master who wants to get whatever he can, a master who's concerned with condemnation, a master who's concerned with penny pinching and all these sorts of things, a miserly master.

While the faithful servants ventured and took risks on the basis of a belief in their master that he was someone who was a good master who would entrust responsibility to those

who were faithful, the unfaithful servant on account of his false perception of his master did not venture anything. He did not put the money to use as a faithful steward and so it's taken from him and given to someone who will make use of it. The wealth entrusted to the sterile service of the unfaithful servant is handed over to the most fruitful and faithful servant and the language of final judgment occurs here again.

As God judges in history I think we should also see that related to final judgment. Judgments in such things as the fall of Sodom and Gomorrah, the fall of Jerusalem in AD 70 and the ways that individuals could be caught up in these things relate not just to historical events but also to eternal destinies. The historical judgment is as it were bringing forward an anticipation of that greater judgment that awaits us and being alert for these specific judgments in history prepares us for that final judgment at the very end in the same way as being prepared for our death prepares us for a greater death that belongs beyond that.

A question to consider, the unfaithful servant in the parable of the talents seems to have a religion merely concerned with preserving what he has rather than doing anything with what has been entrusted to him it's also related to a vision of his master a vision of God. How might we fill out this portrait of the unfaithful servant and how might we avoid following his example?