

Entropy of Devotion

Entropy is the name scientists give to the process by which systems lose energy. Unless you're pushing it, a car slows down. Unless you keep spinning it, a top stops spinning. Unless you keep heating it, water cools down. On a more open level, our world suggests similar patterns. Things go from ordered to chaos, not the other way around. Things decay, rust, weaken, crumble, fade, loosen. Everywhere, God has placed in this world the message that in a fallen world, you have to keep injecting energy to keep something maintained.

As surely as these things wind down, lose power, lose energy, lose cohesion, the same principle is at work in our spiritual lives. The human heart, as long as it is in this mortal flesh, will never reach a place of perpetual revival. You are not going to find a point in your Christian life in which nothing more will be needed to keep you enjoying God, delighting in Him, walking in obedience to Him. Until the day of Christ's return, or of your gathering to Him, your spiritual tires will leak, your spiritual momentum slows down, your passion cools down, and your zeal dips. That is simply a fact. Your Christian life needs continual maintenance, continual injections of truth, continual sharpening and rebuking and encouraging. This is largely why God has set the Christian life up the way He has. He knows our hearts are prone to drifting, growing tired, bored, distracted. So He commands us to give ourselves to certain things that keep and even grow the spiritual momentum. The prayerful reading of the Bible, prayer, gathering with God's people for worship and discipleship, evangelism – these things prevent decay, and encourage growth.

If we are vigilant, we may find that we are not slowing down much anymore. The nature of spiritual growth is going to be that you mature to where you do not as quickly lose spiritual speed; you do not as quickly slow down. But even the one farthest along in the faith is a human being. That means if he or she does not give themselves to those things which keep the heart aflame, they too will lose spiritual momentum.

When we begin to lose spiritual zeal, one of the first places it shows up is our devotion. By devotion I mean the sum total of your inward view of God and your external actions in support of that view. When spiritual entropy is occurring, your devotion starts to weaken.

I want us to take a page out of Scripture to see a real-life example of this, and examine ourselves. I want us to compare ourselves with the situation described in Malachi, and prevent anything similar in our own hearts.

This was a very sad time in Israel's history. Malachi probably wrote in around 450 B.C. Israel was no longer in Babylonian captivity. They were back in the land. The Temple had been rebuilt. The walls of Jerusalem had been rebuilt or were being rebuilt. But spiritually, the people were in decline. If you read the books of Ezra and Nehemiah, you will see some of the spiritual problems around at this time - law-breaking, Sabbath-breaking, intermarriage with idolaters, neglect of God's house, rampant divorce. There was a general attitude of spiritual slothfulness. Their attitude towards the things of God can be seen in verse 13, where they said, "Oh, what a weariness!"

Or in chapter 3:14:

Malachi 3:14 *You have said, 'It is useless to serve God; What profit is it that we have kept His ordinance, And that we have walked as mourners Before the LORD of hosts?*

Now of all the people whom you would expect to be exceptions to this rule, it would be the priests.

Malachi 2:7 *For the lips of a priest should keep knowledge, And people should seek the law from his mouth; For he is the messenger of the LORD of hosts.*

But instead, the priests exemplified the spiritual state of the people. They were to teach and model a life of love for God, fear for Him, reverence and submission.

Here God comes to the priests, and He rebukes them for their lack of reverence.

Malachi 1:6 *A son honors his father, And a servant his master. If then I am the Father, Where is My honor? And if I am a Master, Where is My reverence? Says the LORD of hosts To you priests who despise My name.*

In fact, God does not simply say that they weren't being respectful **enough**. He says He regarded their attitudes as an act of despising His name.

Stop and consider. These were priests. These were full-time ministers of Yahweh. They were not idolaters. They were professing believers, who had allowed spiritual entropy to get them to a place where God regarded their service as acts of spite on His name.

What were they doing?

I. They Offered God What Was Rejected

According to these verses, the priests offered 'defiled' food. How did they do that? Look at verse 8. They were giving God blind animals. They were giving God lame animals. Look down in verse 13. They were bringing sick animals. They were bringing stolen animals. Now why would they do this? Why would priests bring the rejects and sacrifice it?

Because what you offer to God you cannot keep for yourself. Therefore, who was getting the best animals? The priests. Who was getting the leftovers? God.

The rejects are no sacrifice. No one wants them anyway. People actually want to get rid of them. So, for them to be killed on the altar or burnt, just takes them off everyone's hands. The priests had come to that sad state of spiritual entropy, where you are self-seeking. You keep the best for yourself. You give God what is leftover; hardly even a bump to your existence. You would hardly keep it for yourself.

As Christians, what sacrifice do we put on the altar? Romans 12:1 tells us that we are to place our entire being as an offering up to God. But the question is, how much of ourselves does God get?

A lot of professing Christians seem to live this way. They keep the best for themselves and give God what hardly matters to them anyway. They give themselves their best hours – for eating, grooming, or working. If God gets an hour, it is a throwaway hour on a Sunday morning, when they don't have much else to do. Does God get time in the Word with them? Time in prayer? Does God get time in corporate worship from them? "If I can spare it," says the Christian. If you can spare it, then it is no sacrifice.

They give energy to the pursuit of their pleasures – pursuing that hobby, or that interest, or watching that TV programme, or making more money. But does God get the pursuit of their hearts? Is He a focus of desire? Only what desire is leftover. Only what desire remains, after it has been spent on everything else.

They budget entirely around their own wants, needs and luxuries. Missions and ministry – it is quite literally the leftovers. God is up there with pleasure money – buying some extra Coke and

chocolates. God is up there with entertainment money – buying a DVD, going to a film.

Sometimes, they give their best years to the world. When they are young, vigorous, able-bodied, they spend their youth on self. They reason, when I get to the age where my best years are all past, then I'll give them to God. God, the King of the Universe gets leftovers - left-over time, left-over money, left-over years, left-over abilities, and left-over efforts.

Notice that they kept the sacrifices going. They kept the outward forms of worship going. They were good at that. They did not reason - , you know, if we aren't going to give God our best, let's give Him nothing at all. Let's just close the doors, and stop this performance. In fact, who makes that suggestion? God Himself in verse 10:

Malachi 1:10 *Who is there even among you who would shut the doors, So that you would not kindle fire on My altar in vain? I have no pleasure in you," Says the LORD of hosts, "Nor will I accept an offering from your hands.*

Strange how many people have long ago begun worshipping themselves and begun insulting God, but would like the forms to continue. I suppose it gives a sense that everything is still OK. If the church is still meeting at 10, and I go, then I am OK, even though my life is entirely about me.

The priests gave God what was contemptible, defiled, rejected.

Worship comes from an old word 'worthship'. In worship, we display what we think God is worth. Our worship is whatever we offer to Him as tokens of our view of His worth - be it prayer, meditation, obedience, praise, confession, service – it is an offering. If you give God a leftover offering, how much is God worth in your eyes?

II. They Offered God What They Would Not Even Offer Man

Twice in this passage, God gave Israel an earthly comparison to help them measure their worship. In verse 6 he speaks of a son honouring his father. The word for honour actually means glory. Israelites knew the parent-child relationship. They knew that children showed the kind of honour to their earthly father which glorified them as fathers. Sons listened when commanded. They addressed their father with a respectful term. They did not want to disobey them.

Israelites also knew of the master-servant relationship. They knew that slaves showed reverence – that is literally fear towards their earthly masters. Slaves feared the consequences of taking their masters lightly.

Israelites also knew of the governor-citizen relationship. The word for governor is actually Persian, and it refers to the Persian governors who oversaw the land of Israel under its rule. Israelites knew how you would behave in the presence of such a ruler. They knew what you would wear, what food or gifts you might bring.

God's point is, I am a father, I am a master, and I am a governor – a ruler. Where is my honour? Where is My reverence? He asks them in verse 8 to take their service, their worship, and test it on their governor. See if He would accept it. See if He would receive it.

The Malachi test is – take your devotion to God, and see if it would be accepted by an earthly authority. If a parent, an employer, a manager, a city official, a national ruler would not accept your

service, or your excuses for it – then be sure, God won't either.

It would be interesting to see what would happen to the careers of many Christians if they offered their managers, or their customers, what they offer the Lord. “Sorry, boss, that meeting doesn't work for me, it's too early. Sorry, boss, that meeting doesn't work for me, I'm too tired. Had a really late night, been working like a dog all week. Sure you understand. Sorry, can't meet you then – that's nap-time for the kids, or then, that's family-time, or then – that's my TV-time, or then – because my family has come over and we need to entertain them”.

You say, “It's not fair to compare the realities of secular life with serving the Lord” I didn't make the comparison. God did. God deliberately asks the priests to consider whether their service inside God's house would be accepted in any other venue outside God's house.

You see, I am not responsible for receiving or evaluating whatever reasons you might give for your particular approach to serving God. All I am here to do is expound the Scripture. And Scripture says – do the Malachi test. The reason you are giving – would it hold up with any earthly authority? If not, why would you think it will hold up with the Lord? Because He is more understanding, He is also far greater than any earthly authority.

It would be interesting to see what would happen to the relationships of many Christians if they offered to their spouses what they offer the Lord. “Can't speak to you today, honey, I'm running late. Well, I know you don't like me to do that, but I deserve some fun as well.”

It would be interesting to see how many Christian parents would reject the excuses they make before God if those same excuses came out of the mouths of their children.

Spiritual entropy has set in when we give better and higher quality offerings to human beings than we give to God.

III. They Were Self-Righteous in Their Sacrilege.

With their spiritual laziness had come a kind of blindness that saw nothing wrong with their apathy. This is revealed by the questions they keep asking God. Verse 6

“In what way have we despised your name?”

They were perplexed. They had never considered their sacrilege as a despising of God's name.
Verse 7

“In what way have we defiled You?”

These priests had become so full of their own excuses, that they no longer regarded their terrible service as being insulting to God. I can imagine the rationalisations that abounded in the priest's minds. Maybe we can hear ourselves in some of them.

Look, God is not concerned with the petty details of the quality of the animal. What he really cares about is that we are offering up in His direction. God does not want us to get sick or to starve. If we keep offering the best animals, we might go hungry, or worse. Believe me, a sick lamb is better in God's eyes than a sick priest.

“You can't judge my devotion to God by what I do in God's house. There is so much more to my relationship with the Lord than those offerings. My personal relationship with God is totally

separate from my public duties to the Lord. All the other priests are like this. Why should I be any different?"

Do you think God received their excuses, followed by receiving their defiled offerings? I would say He rejected both.

I think of another group who had come to be self-satisfied in their God-despising. The church at Laodicea. Their lifestyle of luxury, pleasure and ease had made them quite self-satisfied. Their lukewarm devotion was neither hot nor cold and it made Christ sick. But their financial prosperity hid from their eyes what they had truly become.

It is exceedingly hard in this culture to correctly read our own devotion. We are told from the earliest age that no one is our boss. In fact, if anyone rules our country, it is only because **we** chose him. Everything is about my right, which if you violate I will sue you. Parents, thanks to Dr Benjamin Spock, are no longer authority figures; they are cheerleader-psychotherapist-advisors. Children do not respect adults. The police are mocked. The politicians are suspected and vilified. Pastors are patronised as mental midgets who couldn't do anything else but tell their fairy-tales every week. In other words, it is like the book of Judges – every man does that which is right in his own eyes.

It is very hard for us to understand reverence. I would dare say most people here today have never bowed to anyone else in their lives. For most cultures before ours – you bowed to someone sometime. And so, in a culture where reverence is dying, it is very hard to properly measure your devotion to God. I simply exhort you - apply God's test. It may have the effect of shaking you out of the little world of double-standards you have constructed for yourself, where somehow God can get what is inferior, leftover and rejected, and yet because of certain circumstances in your life, or because of something about God which you suppose to be true, it will all be OK at the Judgement Seat of Christ.

Because our culture has so little reverence to our authority figures, you will have to go further than that to the heart of this matter. The heart of this matter is not the external acts of devotion alone. The heart of the matter is your view of who God is. Your offerings, your devotion are simply the by-product; the result of how you view God. Why would priests give God leftovers? Because they did not fear God.

Notice how many times in this passage the Lord emphasises His nature – the nature they were not seeing:

Malachi 1:11 *For from the rising of the sun, even to its going down, My name shall be great among the Gentiles; In every place incense shall be offered to My name, And a pure offering; For My name shall be great among the nations," Says the LORD of hosts.*

Malachi 1:14 *But cursed be the deceiver Who has in his flock a male, And takes a vow, But sacrifices to the Lord what is blemished -- For I am a great King," Says the LORD of hosts, "And My name is to be feared among the nations.*

Why would priests give God what they would not offer man? Because they esteemed Him so lightly that He meant less to them than their earthly authorities. Why would they have been able to live with their excuses? Because their view of God had become so small as to make themselves and their own reasons seem sensible and reasonable.

David Wells has written a number of books in which he talks about the state of Christianity. One of

the things he says is that the knowledge of God has become almost weightless to modern Christians. The idea of God rests upon us inconsequentially. The thought of Him hardly changes behaviour. It does not motivate us one way or another. It does not terrify us. It does not do much of anything. So, our fear of Him must then be taught by precept of men. Because what comes into our minds when we think of God is such a weightless, formless, shapeless, transparent thing, we are not compelled from within to fear and love and serve. We have to be told by men, go to church, obey His Word, pray, show respect.

So to go deeper, you will have to regain a knowledge of God that presses upon you, that affects you, that changes you, provokes you and transforms you. How do we gain that kind of knowledge of God? The Bible tells us:

Proverbs 2:1-6 *My son, if you receive my words, And treasure my commands within you, ² So that you incline your ear to wisdom, And apply your heart to understanding; ³ Yes, if you cry out for discernment, And lift up your voice for understanding, ⁴ If you seek her as silver, And search for her as for hidden treasures; ⁵ Then you will understand the fear of the LORD, And find the knowledge of God. ⁶ For the LORD gives wisdom; From His mouth come knowledge and understanding;*

Notice what kind of pursuit this is. This is a hungry, wholehearted, zealous pursuit. It is the pursuit of a treasure seeker, a hungry learner. Notice what is being sought. The Word, the commands, wisdom, understanding, discernment – what is all this? It is seeking God, the mind of God, the will of God, character of God. It is seeking it primarily in the Word of God.

You cannot reverence God if you don't know Him. You won't know Him if you don't seek Him. You won't know Him if you don't seek Him where He discloses Himself. And You won't find Him there either unless you come with a humbled, hungry, seeking heart that honestly, sincerely wants to know God.

Here is a second thing to regain that right view of God. Do not profane the times of worshipping God. What does it mean to profane worship? What was permitted in the temple was sacred. What was not permitted in the temple was to be kept outside, in front of (pro) the temple (fanum). For a thing to be “profane” did not mean that it was unclean or immoral, but that it was ordinary, common, or everyday. Such things had no place in the corporate worship of the temple, and the things of the temple were never to be treated as profane (ordinary or everyday).

To profane worship is to introduce into worship things that are so common, ordinary and everyday as to drag worship down to the level of 'nothing out of the ordinary' This is certainly what the priests of Malachi's time were doing.

To profane worship is to treat the things of worship – the singing, the praying, the preaching of the Word, the Lord's Supper as boring, everyday, common things. This profanes worship, and the effect is to reduce any sense of reverence and fear of God.

Many Christians get confused on this point. The Bible teaches that all of life is to be lived for the glory of God – eating, drinking, washing, computer programming, diaper changing, gardening. They are all part of life lived to God. In that way, all of life is sacred. But that had led some Christians to think that there is no difference between the life you live towards God outside of assembled worship, and our attitudes and actions when we assemble to present ourselves to worship God. So they act and think and dress and speak in church the way they do everywhere else and congratulate themselves for their consistency.

That is wrong. When we directly worship God, we are to consecrate the time, ourselves, the space, the atmosphere, as being especially for God. We are to act differently.

There are things I do to the glory of God outside the church, which I do not do in the church, such as wrestle my son, exercise my body, read my emails, feed the dog.

There are things I talk about which I do not talk about when I come to church, not because they are sinful, but because they are so common and ordinary as to be inappropriate for our special time together.

There are things I wear during the week, which I do not wear to church, not because they are immodest, but because they are so ordinary and common, that they reflect nothing of the sacredness of worshipping God.

There are ways I sit or relax at home that I do not do at church, not because they are sinful, but they do not belong in worship.

There are things I think about and dwell on during the week, which I do not think about when in the house of God, not because they are sinful thoughts, but because they are so common and ordinary that they profane worship if I do that.

The believer who recognises that when you deal with God directly, you must do so with the due reverence and respect, will find that he or she enjoys the rest of life's common acts lived to God's glory, even when not consciously thinking about God. However, the Christian who wants worship to feel as ordinary as chatting with friends will find instead of all of life being sacred, all of life seems secular, including worship.

All this talk about fearing God and reverencing Him - what about loving God? The answer is that they are not separate things. Reverence is how you love God. Fearing God is part of loving God. When you love a being like God, you love Him with awe and reverence.

Spiritual entropy is a reality for all of us. It shows up very often, in a declining devotion. But a declining devotion is at heart, a declining view of God.

So if you fail the Malachi test, I do not ask you today to simply amend the outward acts of service. I say – go to the heart of the matter – your view of God Himself. Have you been seeking Him? And have you been seeking Him so as to find Him? Because Christians who grow complacent in their pursuit of God begin to lose their first love - they do lose spiritual momentum over time.

Second, have you been profaning your times of worshipping Him? Have you been treating it like something common, until your fear of God has become weightless? Then set apart in your mind the importance and uniqueness of worshipping God privately or corporately, and let your attitude further shape your affections.