

## *Insincerely Yours*

Malachi 1: 6-14      Acts 5: 1-11

There is the old story of the village in wine-growing country that received a messenger from the king's court. They were told that the king had heard of their exceptional wines and wanted to meet them and sample their fine wines. The king himself would be paying a visit to their village in two weeks.

This was a great honor for this village and they made plans, recognizing that people would be coming to the village from throughout the entire region to see the king. To truly honor this great figure and show their hospitality to the crowds, there was eager agreement that each vintner would contribute a cask of their best wine to the festival.

On the day of the festival, each vintner came to town with a cask of their best wine and poured the contents into the giant community cask. Tables were spread with all kinds of food and entertainers came from all over to celebrate this great occasion. The crowds poured in from the countryside, some traveling considerable distance. How often does the king come out to this part of the kingdom? This might be their only occasion in their lives to see the king.

Finally, the king arrives with his entourage and is greeted with music and song and dance. With much ceremony, the king is brought to the great cask of gathered finest wines. A cup is drawn from the cask and presented to the king, declaring that it is from the finest wines of all the growers in the village. As the king drank, all eyes were upon him and awaited his verdict. His face looked surprised. Was it delight or disgust? The king said, "It tastes like water."

That's because it was. They checked the cup and it was water. They opened the tap and drew another cup. Water! They opened the tap and let it run out, and it was water – all water.

Was it a trick? Had someone switched the wine with water while they weren't looking? No way; the sheer volume of wine couldn't be changed out with water in such a short time. And, no, there was no reverse miracle of wine being turned into water.

Each vintner had believed that others would contribute *their* finest wine, and each one thought that if the others were giving their finest wine, no one would notice if one cask of water was brought instead. One small cask of water would never be noticed among gallons of wine. This way, a vintner could save their finest wine for future sale and still appear to have contributed to the common effort like a good person fulfilling their commitment.

However, such a gift is a gift of insincerity. Making the appearance, going through the motions, doing something like what everyone else is doing, and making it appear like the commitment is being fulfilled is all rather fraudulent. It is very much the role of the weasel.

None of us, of course, would ever do such a thing so weasel-ly. We're good, decent, sincere folks. Now there may have been a time, once upon a time, long, long ago, in a galaxy far, far away, when you may have done something a tad weasel-ly, probably in the naivete of immature judgment. The thought would hardly gain a foothold in your mature, dedicated, and faithful spirit ... unless it was really necessary. Or habitual. Or you think no one would ever notice.

Of course, if you read scripture, you find another one of those recurrent themes has to do with the insincerity of religious life among God's people. It's frequently mentioned in the context of worship. I think it was just a month or so ago when I preached about Micah 6 which begins with God asking what the problem is with his people. It then features a bitingly sarcastic exchange about what does the Lord God desire in worship:

*“With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt-offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with **thousands** of rams, with **tens of thousands** of rivers of oil? Shall I give my **firstborn** for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”*

The response given by the prophet ignores the obvious and outward signs of worship, declaring instead: *He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy, and to walk humbly with your God?* In other words, you can keep all of your everyday business of worship, ritual, and tradition. The offering of integrity and sincerity is the active pursuit of justice, mercy and faithfulness. The offerings that you bring to make yourselves righteous before God are meaningless unless there is an active pursuit of justice, mercy, and faithfulness which represents genuine worship and adoration of your God.

Worship is the first of several problem issues related in the Book of Malachi, the prophet. God begins the chapter by responding to the concern from the people that God perhaps has not loved them. God replies by recalling how God's love has been for God's people, a bond that exists only with the lineage of Jacob, not of Esau.

While on this theme of love, and having responded to their concern, now it seems to be God's turn. Claiming the honor and respect due to a father from a child, God levels the divine complaint against the priests of the Temple. *Where is the respect due to me? says the Lord of hosts to you, O priests, who despise my name. You say, ‘How have we despised your name?’ By offering polluted food on my altar.*

On the surface at least, it seems like the priests having been trying something like the trick the vintners pulled. Here was the angle. It seems that the priests would pick over the animals that were offered for sacrifice. Bear in mind that the Temple and its priests are being supported by these offerings. Some of the animals' meat will be sold in the Temple marketplace and generate nice revenue. Some of the animals' meat isn't too

marketable and the blemished animals will be the ones sacrificed to God. Sell the good stuff and give God the bad stuff; burn it up! What? Is God going to know the difference?

Like you shouldn't fool Mother Nature from the old margarine ads, it goes doubly so that you shouldn't try to fool God. God is furious about this insulting conduct and faithless attitude, acting as if God was disinterested, irrelevant, or even non-existent. The offering is insincere, dishonest, and a scandalous insult to God.

If this offering has scant value in the market, why would God consider it worthy? God dares them to offer such unworthy animals to the governor, as in payment for taxes. He'd surely reject it. Yet you make such a cheap offering to God!

This sharp rebuke and severe condemnation for an unworthy offering should give us pause. Malachi suggests considering these offerings in terms of their marketplace value. Consider then, what would our typical offering to the church be worth in the marketplace? Or what place would it measure in relation to our household finances?

Would it equal a car payment each month? How much less? Would it equal a mortgage payment? Is your annual gift more than your property taxes? Look at your household finances and do some comparisons. See how your church giving measures up to your "giving" to other things. If you spend so much on other things, how sincere is an offering to God that's only a small fraction of that amount?

While you're at it, check your orientation or attitude. Do you feel like those funds are yours and God gets whatever piece of the action is left over? Or did those funds come from the hand of God, and you're entrusted as a steward who must act faithfully and make an offering in thanksgiving and in support of the work of the Lord done in the church?

In the delightfully dark story from Acts 5, one of my favorites, the narrator has told us how the early church members were selling their personal possessions and giving the proceeds to the community so that all may benefit from the relative wealth that all possess. After hearing accounts about this, along comes Ananias (and then Sapphira) who owned some land, sold it, and brought the offering to the apostles. The twist is that he and his wife held back some of the money. It seems they lied to the apostles and claimed that they had in fact brought all of the money they received, when they hadn't. After Ananias is confronted by Peter for making an insincere and fraudulent offering, he keels over dead. Thump! Instant judgment!

The wife Sapphira comes by a few hours later. She gets challenged about the proceeds of the sale, and she lies. Then Peter confronts Sapphira with the lie, and *she* keels over dead. Thump! Isn't that wonderful! Such a nice clean story. No ambiguity, no gray areas, no drawn-out death scenes. Quick. Done.

While it may have happened just as it's presented, it's worth considering other interpretive possibilities rather than waiting for next Sunday when the plate is passed and seeing if anyone drops dead from holding back. It would be reasonable to say that

Ananias and Sapphira were likely tossed out of the community of Jesus' believers for their unrepentant deceit. Exclusion from the congregation of salvation was equivalent to a condemnation to death. They were effectively cut off from the promise of life fulfilled and eternal within the body of Christ. They've been rejected from the body of Christ, but not for whatever sum they withheld. Their expulsion is due to the insincere, fraudulent, and sinful spirit that inspired their deception.

Both scriptures today say, "you can't fool God." The insincere, unworthy offering is demeaning and insulting to God.

Our offering is always a gift that originates in a faithful and responsive spirit. When the spirit has no solid faith conviction behind it, we'll always make an insincere and unbecoming offering. How do we avoid this?

Go back to Ananias and Sapphira. Keeping a portion for their own use may not have explicitly been part of the community's agreement, but it would have been better to be upfront about it rather than lying and pretending you had fulfilled your promised commitment. The issue was the spirit in the giving, what placed first in their hearts and minds. If God had come first, the story would have been different and the offering would have been honorable. That tells us how we should define our giving to ensure that we're making a worthy offering.

Let's turn to the offering of first-fruits or a tithe. Our faithful offering comes from among the first and best of what we receive from God's providence and blessing. The matter of a tithe is not about the money or the gift, but about what forms our priorities. If the gift offered ends up being what's at the end of the list after all other bills, considerations, and possibilities have been planned for, what are we saying? How faithful and committed will it be? When we offer the last, the least, and the leftover, it becomes an offering that reflects our truest belief in the providence of God. And that, it turns out, isn't very much.

Putting God first is a spiritual exercise, and demands our prayerful attention rather than a mere reflex action each year in our giving. May our offering of financial commitment going forward reflect the strength of our faithful spirit within us.

May we not be carried out like Ananias and Sapphira. Now that's incentive!