



"LISTEN"

What were / are the 'ground rules' in your family? We had several rules when Josh and Abi were younger:

- Don't run with scissors, knives, sharp things.
- Tidy your bedroom (bit of a lost cause that one).
- Don't forget to clean your teeth.
- Always remember to flush the toilet.
- Don't stick your fingers in the plug sockets.
- Don't run down the stairs.
- Change your underwear every day.
- Don't talk to strangers (sad one that).
- Always look both ways when crossing the road.
- Don't eat all the sweets (leave some for Dad).

That makes me a really mean dad, doesn't it? Or maybe just a dad who loved them enough to say this stuff. Because as parents we want our kids to be happy and well and safe and to love God, right? And God wants that too.

And like a loving dad, He's given us His 'ground rules', His words to live by.

And worship by.

Malachi 2:1-9

This was addressed to Israel's priesthood, the Levites – those who had responsibility for Israel's teaching. So yes, this is a message to me as a pastor. But there's a sense in which this applies to all of us. We all have a priestly role (1 Peter 2:9): we all represent God to a watching world.

What does this passage have to teach us about worship? That obedience – living out these 66 books – is a major part. Malachi here give us 4 things that worship is:

1) Hearing (vs1-2). The Hebrew for 'listen' here, *sh'ma*, is an important word. It's how the Jewish declaration of faith in Deuteronomy 6:4 begins: *sh'ma yisrael* ("Hear, O Israel"). And it's how genuine, biblical worship begins, too.

For her birthday, Abi got the latest in music technology (you may have come across one of these): a Walkman. Now whether it's this or the radio or streaming Spotify or Apple Music on our phones, most of us listen to music while going about our daily lives; while doing other things. But to truly appreciate what God has to say – to think, pray and act on it – you have to give God the time and space He deserves. Because to get the most out of anything, you have to stop. And listen (like Samuel in 1 Samuel 3).

But *sh'ma* means more than just 'listen' or 'hear.' It also carries with it the idea of being ready to act. Which is why God expands on it with a phrase that is used twice here: "Set your heart to honour Me." Because *that* is worship.

2) Clearing (vs3-4). This is one of those passages that gets sanitized in our English versions. What does it mean?

In Leviticus 4, when an animal was offered as a sin offering, it was killed and dismembered, but not all of it was placed on the altar. The *peresh* or dung had to be carried out of the camp and burned, as it was deemed unclean. So, what God is saying to the Israelites is: "Your hearts are so far from Me it's like you're offering dung on My altar." I.e. your worship is, to put it bluntly, crap.

In all of us there will be attitudes and actions that the Bible tells us need to go. Now this is not a popular notion these days: people would prefer to think of Jesus as being OK with everything about them. But the reality is: He isn't – that's why He had to die for us. To save us, yes, but also to enable us to become the people we were created to be. The priests we were created to be.

Are we allowing God to do His work in our lives?

3) Fearing (vs5-6). Paraphrased: "I set up a covenant of life and peace with Levi and he feared Me because of it." In OT narrative, the word *yare* or fear means 'be afraid, be very afraid'; people's knees would knock at the very thought of encountering God. But in the wisdom and prophetic books, 'fear' tends to mean 'respect' or 'revere' (though absolute terror still gets a look-in sometimes).

Whichever way we interpret it, it's natural to ask: why do we need to fear God? Doesn't God love us? To which the answer is: yes.

And there's your reason.

Yes, God is scary, and yes, God disciplines His kids, but He is also forgiving, and that's why we should fear (Psalm 130:4). The God who is greater than we can possibly imagine cares about us – so much so that He died for us. I don't know about you, but anyone who is willing to do that for me is worthy of all the love, honour, respect and even fear that I can give. Hence worship = fearing.

4) Steering (vs7-8). The Levites once loved God's *torah* so much they were talking about it, all the time! And that affected how *they* lived, and how *Israel* lived. But things were different now. Simply put: the passion had gone.

Now this is a challenge to all of us, including me. It's easy to talk about God up here, where it's expected, but what about the rest of the time? What do we talk about, with each other? Family; work; movies; music; TV; sport; food; holidays; the weather?! We talk about the things that matter to us, right? Nothing wrong with that. The challenge is: where does *God* feature? Where is *He* in our conversations? If He matters, it should show.

But this is about more than just the words we speak – it's about our actions, too. It's about acknowledging God in all of our ways (Proverbs 3:6). Because if we want to make a difference to the people around us, we've got to model it.

Be salt and light, as Jesus put it (Matthew 5:13-16).

All For Love

Few of us like rules, but in truth, life is full of them. Every relationship has its rules – marriages, families, friendships – and when we break them, the relationship suffers.

Which is why this passage comes with its consequences:

- Curses: "I will curse your blessings", i.e. their blessings will be reversed, taken away, or lose their appeal.
- Exile: "You will be carried away with the dung", i.e. they could lose their land – and their witness – once again.
- Shame: "I have caused you to be despised." They'd cherry-picked the Bible and left out the tricky bits.

What is God saying here? "I used to love you, but now I've changed my mind"? No! It's "I love you so much I'm unwilling to let this continue" (see Revelation 3:19).

The real question is: do we love Him enough to *listen*?