

Malachi 2:16
Guarding Against God's Judgment
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Introduction

This morning we will be finishing up this third section of the book of Malachi as we take a look at Malachi 2:16. In this section God is accusing the Israelites of being faithless to each other in their covenantal relationships. This can clearly be seen by the fivefold repetition of the word "faithless" (vss. 10, 11, 13, 15, 16). What we have seen in this section is that the Israelites are committing a double atrocity: they are (1) divorcing their wives in order to (2) marry foreign, idol-worshipping women. These two issues are entirely interconnected; they are two sides of the same coin. This section ultimately comes to a climax in vss. 15 and 16 where we see an exhortation of warning repeated twice.

"So guard yourselves in your spirit, and let none of you be faithless to the wife of your youth." (vs. 15)

"So guard yourselves in your spirit, and do not be faithless," (vs. 16)

In essence, therefore, God's primary objective in this section of the book of Malachi is to warn the Israelites of the danger of continuing in their lack of faithfulness to their wives. He is warning them that if they continue to be faithless to their wives by divorcing them for the sake of marrying "the daughter of a foreign god" (vs. 11), he will continue to disregard their prayers and offerings. This warning comes to a climax in the verse that we are going to be looking at this morning.

Another Doozie

If you remember, last week we took a look at Malachi 2:15. We spent a good deal of time discussing the difficulty of the passage, observing the wide variance in regard to translation among the different translators. As I forewarned last week, this week we will be looking at another passage which has been the center of much debate. Last week I began with the question, "If the Bible is so accurate and reliable, why are there are so many translations, and why do they disagree with each other." Many have even questioned the reliability of the Bible in the light of the many diverse translations. Interestingly, we must ask the same question this morning because this week's passage is much like last week's passage in that each translation approaches this text differently. Notice that the variance in translation is just as great in this passage as it was in Malachi 2:15. Observe the differences:

ESV: "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."

NASB: "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

HCSB: "If he hates and divorces [his wife]," says the LORD God of Israel, "he covers his garment with injustice," says the LORD of Hosts. Therefore, watch yourselves carefully, and do not act treacherously.

NIV: "I hate divorce," says the Lord God of Israel, "and I hate a man's covering himself with violence as well as with his garment," says the Lord Almighty. So guard yourself in your spirit, and do not break faith.

NKJV: "For the LORD God of Israel says that He hates divorce, for it covers one's garment with violence," Says the LORD of hosts. "Therefore take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

It would be impossible to dissect all of the minute differences in nuance and approach between these translations in the time allotted. So don't worry, this morning's sermon will not be 4 hours long!

Before we actually dig into the passage this morning I want to say a few more things about the nature of translation. Last week I answered the question, "If the Bible is so accurate and reliable, why are there are so many translations, and why do they disagree with each other," by pointing to the nature of translation in general. No two languages are the same. Every language is unique, with its own unique conventions, vocabulary, and style. Some languages are very exact; Classical Greek, for example (which is not to be confused with the Greek of the New Testament, Koine Greek). Other languages are minimalistic and thus vague; Biblical Hebrew, for example. And because every language is so different, translations from one language to another will *always* vary. No two people can simultaneously and yet independently translate any document of any significant length from one language to another without there being wide variance in their translations. This is just par for the course when it comes to translation. So, in other words, the reality of multiple diverse translations of Scripture does not call into question its reliability.

Translation Philosophy

This morning I want to further this discussion a bit and discuss another reason for the variance and divergence of translation by bringing up the topic of translation philosophy. There are three predominate translation philosophies: Formal Equivalence, Dynamic/Functional Equivalence, and Optimal Equivalence. Formal Equivalence is a word for word translation which seeks accuracy to the form, structure, and grammar of the original languages. Formal equivalence has an eye on detail and accuracy and less on readability. The NASB, ESV, NKJV, NRSV, RSV, and KJV are products of this philosophy. Dynamic/Functional Equivalence is a thought for thought translation which seeks to communicate the thoughts of Scripture without as much of an eye for accuracy in detail. They seek accuracy in thought, not detail. The NIV, NLT, CEV, The Good News Bible, are products of this philosophy.

Optimal Equivalence is what I would call a “common sense translation.” In other words, those who follow this philosophy do not conform their translation to either of the other 2 translation approaches; rather they let common sense determine how they translate. They try to be as accurate and word for word as possible, but are not afraid to be thought-for-thought when a word-for-word obscures the original author’s point. This is a hybrid philosophy that I am partial to. The only translation which is considered to be an Optimal Equivalence translation is the HCSB. This actually is my translation of choice because it reads as smooth and easy as the NIV and yet is as accurate as the ESV. This does not mean that the HCSB is the translation of this church. All translations have their strengths and weaknesses. Ultimately, every believer ought to have a primary translation. I strongly urge something closer to the accurate side of things. I personally recommend the HCSB. However, the best approach is to have one main translation and yet 3 or 4 sub translations. When I study I always have open 4 Bibles: an HCSB, NASB, ESV, and an NIV.

The reason I bring up translation philosophy is because it explains further the reason for the many different versions of Scripture. The fact that there are so many different translations that differ on many levels in no way cuts against the reliability of the Bible.

Malachi 2:16

Once again, I am sure that you are waiting with baited breath to know which translation of Malachi 2:16 I prefer. To be honest with you, in this case, I am torn. I really am not partial to any of the renderings of Malachi 2:16. This is often times a reality in bible study. If you remember from last week when we looked at vs. 15, the reason I am partial to the ESV’s rendering of Malachi 2:15 over the rest of the translations is because it fits best with the context. Certainly, each of the five translations that we looked at last week are faithful to the grammar and structure of the original languages; however, as stated last week, the first part of Malachi 2:15 sets the foundation for the urgent exhortation of warning in the second half of the verse. The fact is that the ESV (over against the other 4 translations that we looked at) most adequately builds a foundation for the urgent exhortation in the second half of the verse. I leaned upon context to help me make a conclusion.

The interesting thing about the passage that we will be looking at this morning, Malachi 2:16, is that each of the translations adequately deal with both the original languages and the context. Malachi 2:16, is structured just like vs. 15. The first half of the verse sets a foundation for the exhortation/warning given in the second half of the verse. The difference between Malachi 2:16 and 2:15 is that all of the possible translations for the first half of 2:16 adequately provide a basis for the exhortation/warning given in the second half of the verse (this was not true of 2:15 and that is why I preferred the ESV over the NASB in 2:15). For the sake of time we will not be able to look in detail at all of the different translations. However, I do want to single out the ESV and the NASB because they represent the two most divergent interpretations of this text in a clear way. Let it be said again that both of these translations are faithful to the original languages and the context. They are both feasible renderings of the text. Look at the difference between the two:

ESV: "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."

NASB: "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. "So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."

What is the big difference between these two translations? The question that must be asked is this, "Who is doing the hating, the man who divorces his wife or the Lord?" The *ESV* suggests that it is the man who hates (does not love) his wife (which is evidenced through his divorcing her); while the *NASB* suggests that it is God who hates (and he hates both divorce and the man who divorces). Which is the correct rendering of this passage? Well, the overwhelming majority of modern day Christians in America would without a moment's hesitation prefer the *ESV* over the *NASB*. In fact, the overwhelming majority of modern day American Christians would vehemently oppose the *NASB's* rendering of this passage.

NASB: God Hates Divorce and the Divorcer

Why? Because modern day American Christians would scoff at the thought of God hating anyone. After all, most people believe that the statement, "God hates the sin, but loves the sinner," cannot be found in the Scripture (much like the unscriptural saying, "God helps those who help themselves"). The interesting thing about this statement is not just that it cannot be found in the Bible, but that the Bible actually contradicts it. Turn with me to Psalm 5:5.

The boastful shall not stand before your eyes; you hate all evildoers.

Now turn with me to Psalm 11:5.

The LORD tests the righteous, but his soul hates the wicked and the one who loves violence.

A few years ago I was teaching a Bible Study for the college and career group for our church out in Las Vegas and I simply made mention of Psalm 5:5 and a girl who was attending contorted with more than just a little anger; "What are you saying? What about John 3:16? Doesn't John 3:16 say 'For God so loved the world.' Doesn't *world* include sinful people who do wrong? Clearly God loves all people." I responded, "I understand what John 3:16 says, and I in no way doubt the truth of that verse. However, you must understand that Psalm 5:5 teaches that God hates all evildoers. Are you going to reject Psalm 5:5 as if it were not the word of God because of John 3:16? Listen, Psalm 5:5 is just as much from the very mouth of God as John 3:16, and God expects us to believe both." This girl got more and more angry with me, accusing me of heresy. I wanted to say, "Do you want me to go get you a pair of scissors so that you can cut Psalm 5:5 out of your Bible to make your life a little bit easier and your Christianity a bit more convenient?"

Does God hate evildoers? Yes, he does. Does God love everyone? Yes, he does. He loves his creatures, and he does not delight in the destruction of the wicked. Am I then saying that God simultaneously loves the sinner and hates the sinner? Yes, I am. The girl at the college bible study challenged me on this. “So you believe that God simultaneously loves and hates the sinner at the same time? That’s a contradiction! How do you explain that?” I said, “As soon as you can explain to me how the Trinity works I will explain to you how this works; as soon as you can explain to me how the hypostatic union of Christ works I will explain how this works. The fact is that God is not like us. He is not bound to what we as finite people are bound to. God is completely other than us. He is not some sort of a super human, he is completely other than us. He has capabilities that we do not have.”

You see, so often we come to the text of Scripture with our preconceived ideas of who God is, how he works, what he thinks of us, etc. and we make God jump through our intellectual hoops. But God is not bound to our finite categories and reasoning. God can simultaneously love and hate. This is why it is so important that when we go to the word of God that we simply shut our mouths and let God tell us what is true.

Of course, this leads to the question of whether or not God hates Christians. After all, we all *do evil* (or wrong), thus making ourselves *evildoers*. The answer to this question is, “No, God does not in any way whatsoever hate Christians.” Although Christians do evil; although we sin on a moment to moment, minute by minute basis, once you repent of your sins and believe on the Lord Jesus Christ your sins are cast as far as the east is from the west. Thus, although we sin in real space-time history, in the sight of God we are wearing a robe of Christ’s righteousness (Isa 61:10-11). However, those who have not repented of their sins and believed on the Lord Jesus Christ are still in their sins, and thus God does simultaneously love and hate them—they are still an enemy of God, under his wrath (Romans 5; Ephesians 2).

Paul Washer once suggested that a God of infinite love must hate. He illustrated by saying, “If you love babies, you will hate abortion.” If God loves righteousness, purity, and perfection he must hate sin. And we must understand that fallen humans do not merely do sin, they are sinful at the very core of their being.

Why did I get on this large hiatus about God hating all evildoers? Because most believers in America take the saying, “God hates the sin and loves the sinner,” to be as precious as Scripture itself. And thus, most would immediately reject the NASB’s rendering of Malachi 2:16 because in the NASB we see God hating both divorce *and* the one who divorces. However, the NASB’s rendering of this verse is accurate in regard to grammar, context, and the theology of the whole Bible. We do know that God hates divorce. He hates faithlessness, and that is what divorce is—it is breaking faith with the wife of your youth. (A word to Christians who have divorced wrongly in the past: if you have divorced for unbiblical reasons in the past, God does not hate you, for your sins have been cast as far as east is from the west. This statement applies to any and every sin that a believer may have committed.)

Furthermore, this rendering of the first part of Malachi 2:16 certainly builds a foundation for the exhortation/warning given in the second half of the verse.

NASB: "For I hate divorce," says the LORD, the God of Israel, "and him who covers his garment with wrong," says the LORD of hosts. **"So take heed to your spirit, that you do not deal treacherously."**

Because God hates both divorce and the divorcer, you ought to seriously take heed to your spirit—you might find yourself becoming an enemy of God, being hated by Him, in the cross hairs of his divine judgment. "So [or 'therefore,' or 'in light of what I have just said] you had better guard yourself against breaking faith with your wives. You just might find yourself doing and becoming something that God hates.

ESV: The Man Hates and thus Divorces

Now the ESV suggests that it is the divorcer (the man who divorces), as opposed to God, who does the hating.

ESV: "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."

The ESV's rendering of this passage is faithful to the structure of the original languages and the context as well. Here we see that divorce stems from hate (a lack of love). Malachi is not here talking about any and every divorce, he is referring to the specific divorce that was happening in Israel at that time. He is speaking to a specific people who were committing a very specific sin. The fact is that God did allow the Israelites to divorce for sexual immorality in Deuteronomy 24:1-4, but the Israelites in Malachi were not divorcing their wives for sexual immorality. They were divorcing their wives for no good reason, other than to marry foreign women, something that God had specifically forbidden them to do (Deuteronomy 7:1-4). Both Jesus and Paul suggest that there are biblical grounds for divorce. Jesus identifies 'sexual immorality' as a grounds for divorce in Matthew 19:9:

"And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery."

And although Paul never gives grounds for divorce, he does state in 1 Corinthians 7 that if a believer is married to an unbeliever who wants a divorce, the believer is "not enslaved."

¹²To the rest I say... that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. ¹³If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him. ¹⁴For the unbelieving husband is made holy because of his wife, and the unbelieving wife is made holy because of her husband. Otherwise your children would be unclean, but as it is, they are holy. ¹⁵But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.

Thus, a believing spouse is not permitted to divorce his/her unbelieving spouse, but if the unbelieving spouse wants a divorce, he/she “is not enslaved.” In other words, the believing spouse is not required to fight tooth and nail to keep the marriage together—the believing spouse is not *enslaved* to ‘making it work.’

In these two passages, then, we do see that not all divorce brings the judgment of God upon a person. Jesus suggests that sexual infidelity is grounds for divorce. However, the men who were divorcing their wives in Malachi’s day were not doing so because of their wives’ uncontrolled sexual passions; rather, they were divorcing them for no good reason at all, other than to marry foreign women. They divorced them because of hatred. The verb that comes from the phrase “does not love” (usually rendered “hate”) literally means to “abhor, detest, loathe, be hostile, have a feeling of open hostility and intense dislike.”¹ Thus, these husbands divorced their wives out of feelings of hostility, a complete lack of concern or care for their wives. They had no love for them; they simply wanted out of the covenant of marriage with them.

The ESV then goes on to say that the man who hates and thus divorces his wife “covers his garment in violence.” This is true not only because divorce is a violent ripping apart of what God has brought together (Matthew 19:6), but also because of the future that a divorced woman would have had. You have to remember that the ancient world was much different than ours. Today a woman can be divorced by her husband and fair pretty well. In fact, the world is changing so much that many women make more money than their husbands. Of course, divorce leaves the innocent party left out to dry no matter the circumstance. Those who have been the victims and/or active participants in divorce know how violent divorce is. It rips hearts and ruins lives. However, things in the ancient world were much worse. Divorced women were considered outcasts. For the most part, they were considered to be defiled. Most divorced women were left to their non-existent resources, and thus were reduced to begging and scavenging, and oftentimes prostitution. Only a man who did not love his wife, who did not care for her welfare, would divorce her, leaving her to herself and her own non-existent resources. These Israelite men knew that their wives were going to be hopeless and helpless if they were to divorce them, but they did so anyway. Divorce was an act of violence because they knowingly left their wife in dire straits.

Thus we see the ground for the exhortation/warning given in the second half of the verse (according to the ESV at least). These Israelite men must guard themselves in their spirit lest they break faith with the wives of their youth because a man who divorces his wife is guilty of violence; of destructively ripping apart what God has brought together, and of reducing the one with whom he has covenanted before God to nothing but an outcast and a beggar. Such an act of violence against this woman that God has given as a gift certainly is worthy of divine retribution. The fact that divorce stems from hatred and is ultimately an act of violence ought to cause the Israelite men to guard themselves lest they treat their wives in this manner and in so doing incur the judgment of God.

¹Swanson, James: *Dictionary of Biblical Languages With Semantic Domains : Hebrew (Old Testament)*. electronic ed. Oak Harbor : Logos Research Systems, Inc., 1997, S. DBLH 8533, #1

What to Do?

What do you do when you have two translations that render the passage so differently and yet they are both grammatically, contextually, and scripturally solid? In this case it is extremely difficult to tell (I can say that I lean slightly toward the NASB's rendering of the text).

One thing we must remember: we must not be so focused on the details that we end up missing the forest for the trees. Surely, the NASB and the ESV render the first half of the verse quite differently, but we must not get so bogged down in the differences of translation that we miss the main point of the text. And what is the main point of this text? God is warning the Israelites of the danger of breaking faith with their wives. He is calling them to "guard themselves in their spirit" lest they incur the wrath of God. God has called us/commanded us to pursue faithfulness to Himself and to each other, and the Israelites have completely rejected this command. By breaking faith with their wives they are breaking faith with God. And all of the translations are clear on this point; that they must guard themselves carefully by repenting of their faithlessness lest the judgment of God come upon them.

Conclusion

And as I have stated before, we must not forget that their faithlessness against their wives is ultimately faithlessness against God, because it was God who brought them together, it is God who was witness to their marriage covenant, and faithfulness is God's righteous standard. These Israelites need to fear lest they find themselves under God's righteous judgment.